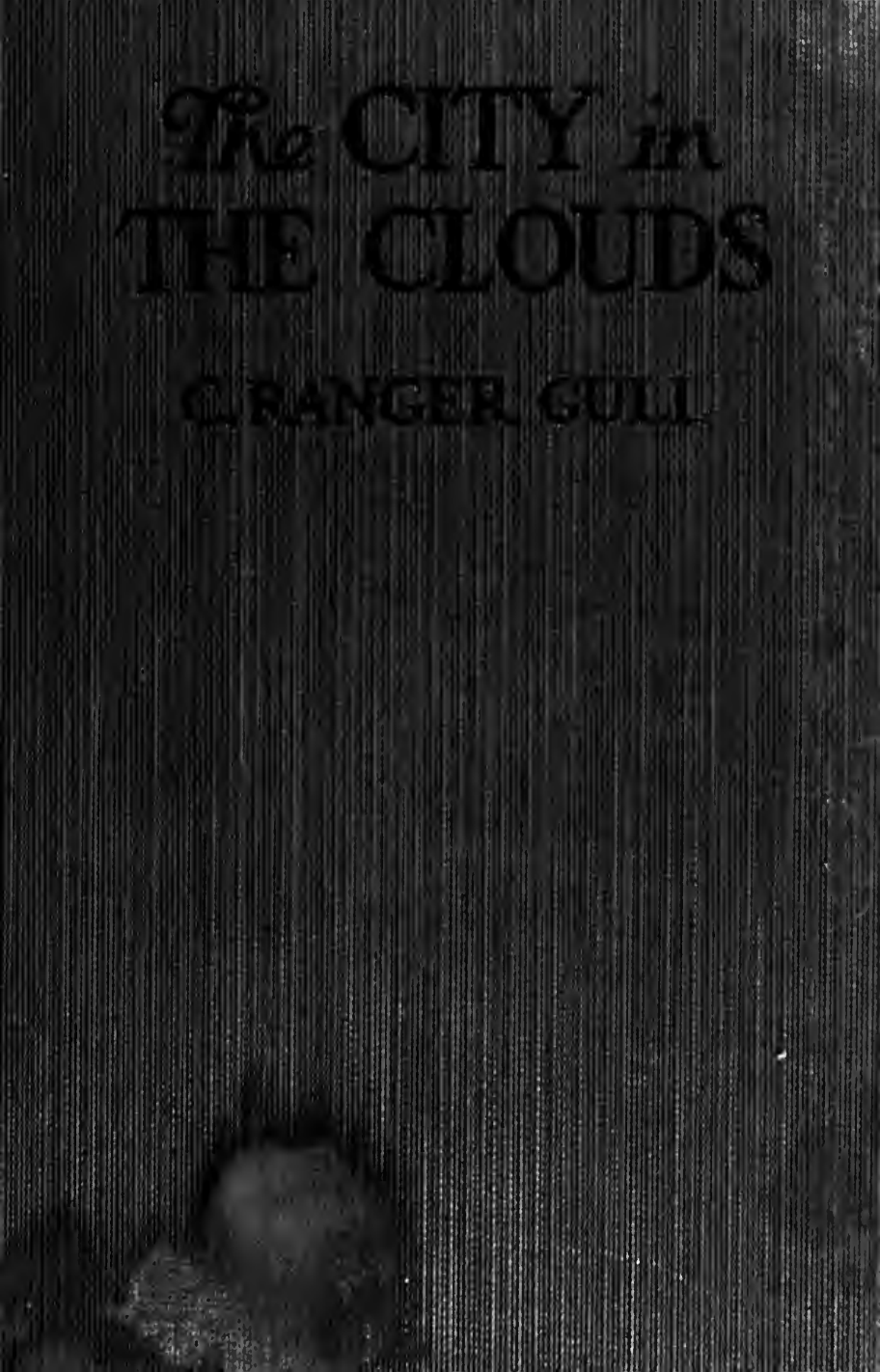
The CITY in THE CLOUDS

ANGER GULL



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THE CITY IN THE CLOUDS

BY

C. RANGER GULL

Author of "The Air Pirate"

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TO

SIR GRIFFITH BOYNTON, Bt.

My Dear Boynton,

We have had some strange adventures together, though not as strange and exciting as the ones treated of in this story. At any rate, accept it as a souvenir of those gay days before the War, which now seem an age away. Recall a Christmas dinner in the Villa Sanglier by the Belgian Sea, a certain moonlit midnight in the Grand' Place of an ancient, famous city, and above all, the stir and ardors of the Masked Ball at Vieux Bruges. — Haec olim meminisse juvabit!

Yours,

C. R. G.

NOTE

By Sir Thomas Kirby, Bt.

The details of this prologue to the astounding occurrences which it is my privilege to chronicle, were supplied to me when my work was just completed.

It forms the starting point of the story, which travels straight onwards.

THE CITY IN THE CLOUDS

PROLOGUE

UNDER a gay awning of red and white which covered a portion of the famous roof-garden of the Palacete Mendoza at Rio, reclined Gideon Mendoza Morse, the richest man in Brazil, and—it was said—the third richest man in the world.

He lay in a silken hammock, smoking those little Brazilian cigarettes which are made of fragrant black tobacco and wrapped in maize leaf.

It was afternoon, the hour of the siesta. From where he lay the millionaire could look down upon his marvelous gardens, which surrounded the white palace he had built for himself, peerless in the whole of South America.

The trunks of great trees were draped with lianas bearing brilliantly-colored flowers of every hue. There were lawns edged with myrtle, mimosa, covered with the golden rain of their blossoms, immense palms, lazily waving their fans in the breeze of the afternoon, and set in the lawns were marble pools of clear water from the center of which fountains sprang. There was a continual murmur of in-

sects and flashes of rainbow-colored light as the tiny, brilliant humming birds whirred among the flowers. Great butterflies of blue, silver, and vermilion, butterflies as large as bats, flapped languidly over the ivory ferns, and the air was spicy and scented with vanilla.

Beyond the gardens was the Bay of Rio de Janeiro, the most beautiful bay in all the world, dominated by the great sugar-loaf mountain, the Pão de Azucar, and studded with green islands.

Gideon Morse took a pair of high-powered field-glasses from a table by his side and focused them upon the harbor.

A large white yacht, lying off Governador, swam into the circle, a five-thousand-ton boat driven by turbines and oil fuel, the fastest and largest private yacht in existence.

Gideon Morse gave a little quiet, patient sigh, as if of relief.

He was a man of sixty odd, with a thick thatch of white hair which came down upon his wrinkled forehead in a peak. His face was tanned to the color of an old saddle, his nose beaked like a hawk, and his mouth was a mere lipless cut which might have been made by a knife. A strong jaw completed an impression of abnormal quiet, and long enduring strength. Indeed the whole face was a mask of immobility. Beneath heavy black brows were eyes as dark as night, clear, but without expression. No one looking at them could ever tell what were the thoughts behind. For the rest, he was a man of medium height, thick-set, wiry, and agile.

A brief sketch of Gideon Mendoza Morse's career must

be given here. His mother was a Spanish lady of good family, resident in Brazil; his father an American gentleman of Old Virginia, who had settled there after the war between North and South. Morse was born a native of Brazil. His parents left him a moderate fortune which he proceeded to expand with extraordinary rapidity and success. When the last Emperor, Dom Pedro II., was deposed in 1889, Gideon Mendoza Morse was indeed a rich man, and a prominent politician.

He took a great part in establishing the Republic, though in his earlier years he had leaned towards the Monarchy, and he shared in the immense prosperity which followed the change.

His was not a paper fortune. The fluctuations of stocks and shares could hardly influence it. He owned immense coffee plantations in Para, and was practically the monopolist of the sugar regions of Maranhao, but his greatest revenues came from his immense holdings in gold, manganese, and diamond mines. He had married a Spanish lady early in his career and was now a widower with one daughter.

She came up upon the roof-garden now, a tall slip of a girl with an immense quantity of lustrous, dead-black hair, and a voice as clear as an evening bell.

"Father," she said in English—she had been at school at Eastbourne, and had no trace of Spanish accent—"what is the exact hour that we sail?"

Morse slipped out of the hammock and took her arm in his.

"At ten to-night, Juanita," he replied, patting her hand. "Are you glad, then?"

"Glad! I cannot tell you how much."

"To leave all this"—he waved his hand at what was probably the most perfect prospect earth has to offer—"to leave all this for the fogs and gloom of London?"

"I don't mind the fogs, which, by the way, are tremendously exaggerated. Of course I love Rio, father, but I long to be in London, the heart of the world, where all the nicest people are and where a girl has freedom such as she never has here."

"Freedom!" he said. "Ah!"—and was about to continue when a native Indian servant in a uniform of white linen with gold shoulder knots, advanced towards them with a salver upon which were two calling cards.

Morse took the cards. A slight gleam came into his eyes and passed, leaving his face as impassive as before.

"You must run away, darling," he said to Juanita. "I have to see some gentlemen. Are all your preparations made?"

"Everything. All the luggage has gone down to the harbor except just a couple of hand-bags which my maid has."

"Very well then, we will have an early meal and leave at dusk."

The girl flitted away. Morse gave some directions to the servant, and, shortly after, the rattle of a lift was heard from a little cupola in one corner of the roof.

Two men stepped out and came among the palms and flowers to the millionaire.

One was a thin, dried-up, elderly man with a white mustache—the Marquis da Silva; his companion, powerful, black-bearded and yellow-faced, obviously with a touch of the half-caste in him—Don Zorilla y Toro.

"Pray be seated," said Morse, with a low bow, though he did not offer to shake hands with either of them. "May I ask to what I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"It is very simple, señor," said the marquis, "and you must have expected a visit sooner or later."

The old man, speaking in the pure Spanish of Castille, trembled a little as he sat at a round table of red lima-wood encrusted with mother-of-pearl.

"We are, in short," said the burly Zorilla, "ambassadors."

They were now all seated round the table, under the shade of a palm whose great fans clicked against each other in the evening breeze which began to blow from the cool heights of the sugar-loaf mountain. The face of Gideon Morse was inscrutable as ever. It might have been a mask of leather; but the old Spanish nobleman was obviously ill at ease, and the bulging eyes of the well-dressed half-caste, with his diamond cuff links and ring, spoke of suppressed and furious passion.

In a moment tragedy had come into this paradise.

"Yes, we are ambassadors," echoed the marquis with a certain eagerness.

"A grand and full-sounding word," said Gideon Morse. "I may be permitted to ask—from whom?"

Quick as lightning Don Zorilla held out his hand over

the table, opened it, and closed it again. There was a little glint of light from his palm as he did so.

Morse leant back in his chair and smiled. Then he lit one of his pungent cigarettes.

"So! Are you playing with those toys still, gentlemen?"

The marquis flushed. "Mendoza," he said, "this is idle trifling. You must know very well—"

"I know nothing, I want to know nothing."

The marquis said two words in a low voice, and then the heads of the three men drew very close together. For two or three minutes there was a whispering like the rustle of the dry grasses of the Brazilian campos, and then Morse drew back his chair with a harsh noise.

"Enough!" he said. "You are madmen, dreamers! You come to me after all these years, to ask me to be a party in destroying the peace and prosperity our great country enjoys and has enjoyed for more than thirty years. You ask me, twice President of the Republic which I helped to make—"

Zorilla lifted his hand and the great Brazilian diamonds in his rings shot out baleful fires.

"Enough, señor," he said in a thick voice. "That is your unalterable decision?"

Morse laughed contemptuously. "While Azucar stands," he said, "I stand where I am, and nothing will change me."

"You stand where you are, Mendoza," said the marquis with a new gravity and dignity in his voice, "but I assure you it will not be for long. You have two years to run,

that's true. But at the end of them be sure, oh, be very sure, that the end will come, and swiftly."

Morse rose.

"I will endeavor to put the remaining two years to good use," he said, with grim and almost contemptuous mockery.

"Do so, señor," said Zorilla, "but remember that in our forests the traveler may press onward for days and weeks, and all the time in the tree-tops, the silent jaguar is following, following, waiting—"

"I have traveled a good deal in our forests in my youth, Don Zorilla. I have even slain many jaguars."

The three men looked at each other steadily and long, then the two visitors bowed and turned to go. But, just as they were moving off towards the lift dome, Zorilla turned back and held out a card to Don Mendoza. It was an ordinary visiting card with a name engraved upon it.

Morse took it, looked at the name, and then stood still and frozen in his tracks.

He did not move until the whirr of the bell and the clang of the gate told him the roof-garden was his own again.

Then he staggered to the table like a drunken man, sank into a chair and bowed his head upon the gleaming pearl and crimson.

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN my father died and left me his large fortune I also inherited that very successful London newspaper, the *Evening Special*. I decided to edit it myself.

To be six-and-twenty, to live at high pressure, to go everywhere, see everything, know everybody, and above all to have Power, this is success in life. I would not have changed my position in London for the Premiership.

On the evening of Lady Brentford's dance, I dined alone in my Piccadilly flat. There was nothing much doing in the way of politics and I had been playing golf at Sandown the whole of the day. I hadn't seen the paper until now, when Preston brought it in—the last edition—and I opened it over my coffee.

There were, and are, few things that I love better than the *Evening Special*. I claim for it that it is the most up-to-date evening newspaper in England, bright and readable from the word "go," and singularly accurate in all its information.

There was a long time yet before I need dress, and I sat by the balcony, with the mellow noises of Piccadilly on an early summer's evening pouring into the room, and read the rag through.

On one of the last pages, where the society gossip and women's chat appear, I saw something that interested me.

Old Miss Easey, who writes the society news, was one of my most valued contributors. With her hooked nose, her beady black eyes and marvelous coffee-colored wig, she went everywhere by right of birth, for she was connected with half the peerage. Her news was accurate and real. She faked nothing, because she got all her stuff from the inside, and this was known all over London. She was well worth the thousand a year I paid her, and the daily column signed "Vera" was an accepted fact in the life of London society.

To-day the old girl had let herself go. It seemed—of course there had been paragraphs in the papers for some days—that the great Brazilian millionaire, Gideon Mendoza Morse, had exploded in society like a bomb. He had taken a whole floor of the Ritz Hotel, and it was rumored that he was going to buy an empty palace in Park Lane and astonish town. Every one was saying that he had wealth beyond the dreams of avarice—which is, of course, awful rot when you come to think of it, because there are no bounds whatever to avarice.

"Vera" was not expatiating upon the Brazil Nut's wealth, but upon his only daughter. It was put in a veiled way, and that with well-bred reticence for which we paid Miss Easey a thousand a year—no cheap gush, thank you, in the *Evening Special*—that Miss Morse was a young girl of such superlative loveliness that there was not a débutante to come within a mile of her. I gathered, also, that the young lady's first very public appearance was to be made to-night at the house of the Marchioness of Brentford in Belgrave Square.

The news certainly gave an additional interest to the prospect of the evening, and I wondered what the girl was really like.

I had motored up from Sandown and sat down to dinner as I was. Perhaps I was rather tired, but as I sat by the window and dusk came over the Green Park while all the lights of Piccadilly were lit, I sank into a sort of doze, assisted by the deep, organ-like hum of the everlasting traffic.

Yes, I must really have fallen asleep, for I was certainly in the middle of some wild and alluring adventure, when I woke with a start to find all the lights in my dining-room turned on, Preston standing by the door, and Pat Moore shaking me violently by the shoulder.

"Confound you, don't do that!" I shouted, jumping up —Pat Moore was six feet two in height, and the heaviest man in the Irish Guards. "Hallo, what are you doing here?"

"It's myself that has looked in for a drink," he said. "I thought we'd go to the ball together."

I was a little more awake by this time and saw that Pat was in full evening kit, and very grand he looked. He was supposed to be the handsomest man in London, on the large swaggering side, and certainly, whether in uniform or mufti, he was a very splendid figure. Nevertheless, he had no more idea of side than a spaniel dog, and he was just about as kind and faithful as the sportsman's friend. He possessed a certain downright honesty and common sense that endeared him to every one, though his

own mother would hardly have called him clever. At an earlier period of our lives he had caned me a good deal at Eton, and it was difficult to get out of his dear, stupid old head that he had not some vague rights over me in that direction still.

"Now, Tom," he said, pouring himself out a mighty drink —for his head was cast-steel, "you go and make yourself look pretty and then come back here, 'cos I have something to tell you."

I went obediently away, bathed, shaved, was assisted by Preston into evening clothes and returned to the dining-room about a quarter to ten.

"What have you got to tell me, Pat?"

He thought for a moment. I believe that he always had to summon his words out of some cupboard in his brain—"Tom, I've seen the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Then leg it, Pat, hare away from temptation, or she'll have you!"—Pat had ten thousand a year and had been a dead mark for all sorts of schemes for the last two years.

"Don't be a silly ass, Tom, you don't know what you're talking about. This is serious."

"I don't know who *you're* talking about."

He was heaving himself out of his chair to explain, when the door opened and Preston announced "Lord Arthur Winstanley."

"Hallo, what brings you here?" I said.

"Thought I'd come in for a drink. Saw you were going

to mother's to-night, Tom, thought we might as well be going together. Hallo, Pat. You coming along too?"

"Thought of doin' so," said Captain Moore.

Arthur threw himself into a chair—slim, clean shaved, with curly black hair and dark blue eyes, his clean-cut, clever face alive with youth and vitality.

"Tom," he said to me, "to-night you are going to see the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Hallo!" Pat shouted, "you've seen her too?"

"Seen her? Of course I have. Mother's giving the dance for her to-night."

Then I understood.

"Oh, Miss Morse?" I said.

"Jooaneeta!" said Pat in his rich, Irish voice.

"Generally pronounced 'Whanita' soft—like tropic moonlight, my old geranium," said Arthur.

"Sure, your pronunciation won't do at all, at all."

Pat twirled the end of his huge mustache, then he heaved a cushion. "You and your talk!" he said.

"Well, I've not seen her," I remarked, "but I'm quite willing to take the word of two experts. Isn't it about time we went?"

Winstanley produced a platinum watch no thicker than a half-crown from the pocket of his white waistcoat.

"Well, perhaps it might be," he said. "We can take up strategic positions, and get there before the crush. Although I don't live at home, I've got a snug little couple of rooms they keep for me, and mother will see that—"

He smiled to himself.

"Now look here," I said, "fair does! You are already half-way up the course with the fair Brazilian, but do let your pals have a chance. I suppose all the world will be round her, but do see that Pat and I have a small look in."

"Of course I will. We've done too much hunting together, we three. I tell you, Tom, you will be bowled clean over at the very sight of her. There never was such a girl since Cleopatra was a flapper. Now, send old Preston for a taxi and we'll get to cover side."

It was about half-past ten as we entered the hospitable portals of Brentford House in Belgrave Square. There was a tremendous crush; I never remember seeing so many people at Lady Brentford's, for, though everybody went to her parties, they were never overcrowded, owing to the immense size of the famous old London House.

Pat Moore and I kept close to Arthur, who, as a son of the house, knew his way a great deal better than we did, and we soon found ourselves at the top of the staircase and close to the alcove where Lady Brentford and her daughter, Lady Joan Winstanley, were standing, while I saw the bald head of the marquis, who was as innocent of hair as a new laid egg, shining in the background.

Dear Lady Brentford greeted Pat—who had formed a sort of battering-ram for us on the staircase—with marked kindness. It was thought that she saw in him a prospective husband for Arthur's sister. After greeting his mother and asking a question, Arthur went off at once and my turn came.

"My dear Sir Thomas, I am so glad to see you. Are you like all the other young men in London to-night?"

"I sincerely hope not," I told her, though I knew very well what she meant.

We were old friends, and she was not deceived for a moment. "I understand you perfectly, you wicked boy."

"Well then, Lady Brentford"—I lowered my voice—"has she come?"

Her eyes gleamed.

"Not yet, but I am expecting her every moment. Now, I am going to be kind to you. You wait here, just a little behind me, and I'll introduce you at once."

I hope I looked as grateful as I felt, for I confess my curiosity was greatly aroused, and besides it would be such a score over Pat and Arthur. There's something in power after all! Had I been merely Tom Kirby whose father had received a baronetcy for, say, soap, Lady Brentford would not have been nearly as nice, even though Arthur and I had been bosom friends at Oxford. But you see I was the *Evening Special* and that meant much, especially in a political house like this.

I waited, and talked a little with Lord Brentford, that sterling, old-fashioned member of more Cabinets than one would care to count. He said "hum," and then "ha," and then "hum" again, which was the extent of his conversation on every occasion except that of a specially good dinner, when he added "ho."

And then, I suppose it was about eleven o'clock, there was a stir and a movement all down the grand staircase.

Except that the band in the ballroom did not burst into the strains of the National Anthem, it was exactly like the arrival of royalty. Coming up the staircase was a thick-set man of medium height with white hair, a brown face, and good features, but of such immobility that they might have been carved in sandstone. By his side, very simply dressed, and wearing no ornament but one rope of great pearls, came Juanita Morse.

If I live for a thousand years I shall never forget that first vision of her. I have seen all the beauties of London, Paris and Rome, danced with many of them, spoken at least to the majority, but never before or since have I seen such luminous and compelling loveliness. It is almost impossible for me to describe her, a presumption indeed, when so many abler pens than mine have hymned her praises. The poets of two Continents have lain their garlands of song at her little feet. She has been the theme of innumerable articles in the Press, the heroine of a dozen novels. And yet I must give some impression of her, I suppose. She was slender and tall, though not too tall. Her hair, which must have fallen to her feet and enveloped her like a cloud of night, was dead black. But it was not the coarse, lifeless black of so many women of the Latin race. It was as fine as spun silk, gleaming, vital and full of electricity—a live thing of itself, so it seemed to me. Her father's eyes were unpolished jet, but hers were of a deep blue-black, large, lustrous, and of unfathomable depth. They were never the same for two moments together and the light within them was forever new. But what's the

good of a catalogue—after all, it expresses very little. There was not a feature of her face, not a line of her form that was not perfect, and her smile was the last real enchantment left in the modern world. . . .

In two minutes, I, I—Tom Kirby, was walking towards the ballroom with her hand upon my arm. How all the women stared, nodded and whispered! how all the men hated me! I caught sight of Pat and Arthur, and, lo! their faces were as those who lie in wait, who grin like dogs and run about the city—as I told them some hours afterwards.

Thank heavens that all the vulgar modern dances were not only perishing of their own inanity at that time, but had never been allowed in Brentford House. The best band in town had begun a delightful waltz, and we slipped into it together as if passing through curtains into dreamland.

I don't remember that we said very much to each other —certainly I was not going to ask her how she liked London and so forth. She did not seem the sort of girl to appreciate the farthing change of talk.

But, somehow or other, we conversed with our eyes. I was as certain of this as of the fact that I was dancing with her, and, long after, in a situation and moment of the most deadly peril, she confessed it to me.

Towards the end of the dance, when the flutes and violins glided into the last movement, I said this—"Miss Morse, I know that I am doing the most dreadful thing. All London wants to dance with you to-night, and I have

had the great privilege of being the very first. But could you, do you think you possibly could, give me just one more dance later on in the evening?"

"Of course I will, Sir Thomas," she said, and her voice was as clear as an evening bell. "I think you dance beautifully."

We circled round the room for the last time and then I resigned her to Lady Brentford, who was looking after the girl, with an eloquent look of thanks. Immediately she became swallowed up by a regiment of black coats, and I saw her no more for a time.

I am extremely fond of dancing, but I sought out no other damsel now, but went to a buffet and drank a long glass of iced hock-cup—as if that was going to quench the fever within! Then I found my way to a lonely spot in one of the conservatories and sat thinking hard. I will say nothing as to the nature of my reverie—it may very easily be guessed. But from time to time I concentrated all my powers in living over again the divine moments of that dance. I was finally, irrevocably, passionately in love. It seems the maddest thing to say for a hard-headed, level-minded man of the world such as I was. I suppose I had known her for just about quarter of an hour, and yet I knew that there would never be any other woman for me and that when my days were at an end her name would be the only one upon my lips.

A little later on in the evening, before my second and final dance with his daughter, I had the opportunity of

a talk with Mr. Morse himself. I say at once, and I am not letting myself be colored by what happened afterwards and the intimate relations into which I was thrown with him, I say at once that I found him charming. There was an immense force and power about him, but this was not obtruded upon one, as I have known it to be in the case of other extremely wealthy and successful men, both English and American. This super-millionaire had all the graces of speech and courtesy of manner of the Spanish great gentleman. And curiously enough, he took to me. I was quite certain of that. Whether he wanted to use me in any way—and nine-tenths of the people I met generally did—I could not have said. At any rate I determined that if he did I was very much at his disposal.

We watched Miss Morse dancing with old Pat, who, for all his sixteen stone, was as light as a cat on his feet.

"Do you know who that is dancing with Juanita?" Morse asked simply.

"Oh, yes. Captain Moore, Patrick Moore, of the Irish Guards. He is one of my most intimate friends and one of the best fellows in the world."

Then Morse said a curious thing, which I could not fathom just then. He said it half to me and half to himself in a curiously, thoughtful way.

"—A fine fellow to have with one in an emergency."

Well, of course, I didn't like to tell him that dear old Pat, while he had common sense enough to come indoors while it rained, had no mind—in the real sense of that word —whatever. It did not occur to me for a moment that

Gideon Morse might have been speaking simply of Pat's *physical* qualities.

Pat's face was marvelous to look upon. It was one great, glowing mass of happiness. He did not take the least trouble to disguise his ecstasy, and if ever a man showed he was in paradise, Pat Moore did then. It was different when Juanita danced with Arthur. His handsome, clever face was not in repose for a moment. It was sharpened by eagerness, and he talked incessantly, provoking answering smiles and flashes from the girl's wonderful eyes. My heart sank. I knew how Arthur Winstanley could talk when he chose—as all England was to learn two or three years later when he entered the House of Commons.

"And that man?"—the low, resonant voice of Mr. Morse was again in my ears, for I had been neglecting my duties to all the girls I knew, most dreadfully, and remained with him for the space of three dances.

"Oh, that's another friend of mine, Lord Arthur Winstanley. He is a son of the house, the second son. Charles, the heir, is with his regiment in India."

Mr. Morse thanked me and soon afterwards two very great people indeed came up, and I melted away. I went to my seat in the conservatory again. I did not care how rude it was, how I was betraying Lady Brentford's hospitality—being known as a dancing man and expected to dance—but I was determined not to touch any other girl that night until Juanita Morse and I had danced again together.

It came and passed. Afterwards I slipped downstairs, got my hat and overcoat and left the house, without, I think, being observed by any one.

The night air was fresh and sweet and I determined to walk before I reached home, for my mind was in a whirl of sensation. I turned into the great, dark cañon of Victoria Street, which was almost empty, and heard my footsteps echoing up the cliff-like sides of the houses. I caught a glimpse of the moon silvering the Campanile of Westminster Cathedral, and when I reached the Abbey, it and the Houses of Parliament were washed in soft and brilliant light. And yet, somehow, I could not think. I could not survey, with my usual cool detachment, the situation which had suddenly risen in my life. I remember that the predominant feeling was a wish that I had never gone to Lady Brentford's, that I had never seen or spoken to Juanita Morse. What was the use after all? She was as much above my hopes as a Princess of the Royal House, and yet I knew that without her I should never be really happy again.

It was in a sort of desperation that I hurried up Parliament Street and through Trafalgar Square, feeling that I was a fool and mad, wanting to hide my shame in my own quiet rooms, where at any rate I should be alone.

I opened the door with my Yale key and ran lightly up the stairs to the flat on the first floor which I occupied. As I went into the lounge hall and took off my overcoat, Preston, whom I had not told to wait up for me, came

from the passage leading to the servants' quarters carrying a tray.

"I shan't want any supper, thank you, Preston," I said in surprise.

"Thank you, sir, very good sir," he replied, "but his lordship and Captain Moore are here and have just asked for something."

My first emotion was one of unutterable surprise, and then I scowled and felt inclined to swear. What on earth were those two doing here at this time of night, just when I would have given almost anything to be left alone?

I hesitated for a moment and then walked into the smoking-room.

Pat was seated in a lounge chair smoking a cigar. Arthur was pacing up and down the carpet. Neither of them appeared to have been talking, and, as I came in, they looked at me curiously, and I saw that their faces in some subtle way were changed.

They were my best friends, for years we had been accustomed to treat each other's quarters and possessions as if they were our own, and yet now I felt as if they were intruding strangers, though I tried hard to be genial.

"Hallo," I said in a voice that cracked upon the word, "didn't expect to see you again. Anything special?"

Preston was putting his tray of sandwiches and deviled biscuits on the table, so we could not say much, but directly he had left the room old Pat got up from his chair. He held out his hand, pointing at me with a trembling finger. His face was purple.

"You, you danced twice with her," he said.

So that was it! I grew ice-cold in a moment.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand to what you refer," I said, "but what the devil is that to you?"

"Pat, don't be a fool!" Arthur whipped out, though the look he gave me, which he tried to disguise, was not a friendly one.

"Fool is hardly the word," I said. "Kindly explain yourself, Moore, and forget that you are my guest if you like—I don't mind."

The huge man trembled. Then he turned away with a sort of snarl, snatched his handkerchief from his cuff and mopped his face.

I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Can you explain this, Arthur?" I asked.

He sat down too, and began to tap with his shoe upon the carpet.

"Oh, I don't know," he said sullenly. "You were the only man in the room, Kirby, to whom she gave more than one dance."

"That's as may be. I suppose you don't propose to expostulate with the lady herself? And, by the way, I always thought that it wasn't exactly form to discuss these things in the way you appear to have been doing."

That got Arthur on the mark. His face grew very white and he sat perfectly still.

Then Pat heaved himself round.

"She's not for you, at any rate," he said. "They will marry her to a duke or one of the Princes."

Suddenly the humor of all this struck me forcibly and I lay back in my chair and burst into a peal of laughter.

"That's quite likely," I said, "though I don't think, what I have seen of Mr. Morse, that he is likely to have ambitions that way, and I am quite certain that Miss Morse will marry the man she wants to marry and no one else, whether he is a thoroughbred or hairy at the heels. I think all this talk on your part—remember you began it, Pat—is perfectly disgraceful, to say nothing of its utter childishness. As for your saying that a young lady whom I have met for the first time to-night and danced with twice, is not for me, it's a damnable piece of impertinence that you should dare to insinuate that I look upon her in the way you suggest."

I jumped up from my seat and knew that I was dominating them all right.

"Supposing what you say is true, I admit that my chance isn't worth two penn'orth o' cold gin, though it's every bit as good, and probably better, than yours, all things considered. You are certainly a fine figure of a man."

I was furious, mad, keen to provoke him to an outburst. The calculated insult was patent enough.

I thought he was about to go for me, and I stood ready, when "What about me?" came in a dry crackling voice from Arthur.

"Oh, I should put you and me about level," I said, with the courtesy title as a little extra weight. It is a pity you should be the second son."

"Damn you, Kirby!" he burst out, blazing with anger.

I lifted up my hand and looked at both of them.

"I came in here," I said, "to my own house and find my two best friends, that I thought, waiting for me. A few hours ago I should have thought such a scene as this utterly impossible. I will ask you both to remember that it has not been provoked by me in any way, and that directly I came in you turned on me in the most atrocious and ill-bred way. Of your idea of the value of friendship I say nothing at all—it is obvious I must say nothing about that. Now you have forced the pace I will say this. To marry that young lady—I don't like to speak her name even—is about as difficult as to dive in a cork jacket or keep a smelt in a net. But I mean to try. I mean to use every ounce of weight I've got. I shall almost certainly fail, but now you know."

"Since you have said that," Pat broke in, "handicaps be damned! I'm a starter for the same stakes, and it's hell for leather I'll ride, and it's meself that says it, Tom."

Arthur Winstanley spoke last.

"I'm a fellow of a good many ambitions," he said quietly, "though I've never bothered you chaps with them. Now they are all consolidated into one."

Then we all stood and looked at each other, the cards on the table, and in the faces of the other two at least there was uneasiness and shame.

Just at that moment a funny thing happened. Preston had brought in an ice pail full of bottles of soda water. The heat of the night, or something, caused one of the corks to break its confining wire and go off with a star-

tling report, while a fountain of foam drenched the sandwiches.

"Me kingdom for a drink!" said Pat. "Oh, the sweet, blessed, gurgling sound!" and striding to the table he mixed a gargantuan peg.

Arthur and I met behind Pat's back and he held out his hand to me, biting his lower lip.

"We've behaved abominably, old soul," he said.

The big guardsman turned round and raised his glass on high.

"Here's to the sweetest and most lovely lady in the world, bedad!" he shouted, accentuating his Irish brogue. "May the best man win her, fair fight, and no favors, and may the Queen of Heaven and all the saints watch over the little darlint and guide her choice aright!"

So all our midnight madness passed like a fleeting cloud. An extraordinary accession of high spirits came to us as we pledged the dark-haired maiden from Brazil. And it was Pat, dear old Pat, who welded us together in a league of chivalry against which nothing was ever to prevail.

"Tom," he said, "Arthur—we are all like brothers, we always have been. Let there be no change in that, now or ever. I have something to propose."

"Go on, Pat," said Arthur.

"Sure then, since we all love the same lady, that ought to bind us more together than anything else has ever done. But since we cannot all marry her, let us agree, in the first place, that no outsider ever shall."

"Hurrah!" said Arthur—I could see that he was fear-

fully excited—throwing his glass into the fireplace with a crash.

"I am with you, Pat!" I cried. "It's to be one of us three, and we are in league against all the other men in London. And now the question is—"

"Hear my plan. This very night we'll draw lots as to which of us shall have the first chance. The man who wins shall have the entire support of the other two in every possible way. If she accepts him, then the fates have spoken. If she doesn't, then the next man in the draw shall have his chance, and the rejected suitor and the poor third man shall help *him* to the utmost of their ability. Is that clear?"

He stopped and looked down at us from his great height with a smiling and anxious face.

Dear old Pat, I shall always love to think that the proposal came from him, straight, clean and true, as he always was.

"So be it," Arthur echoed solemnly. "The league shall begin this very night. Do either of you chaps know any Spanish, by the way?"

We shook our heads.

"Well, I do," he continued, "and we'll form ourselves into a Santa Hermandad—'The Holy Brotherhood'—it was the name of an old Spanish Society of chivalry ever so many years ago."

"Santa Hermandad!" Pat shouted, "and now to shake hands on it. I think we'll not be needing to take an oath."

Our three hands were clasped together in an instant and we knew that, come what might, each would be true to that bond.

"And now," I said, "to draw lots as to who shall be the first to try his chance. How shall we settle it?"

"There's no fairer way," said Arthur, "than the throw of a die. Have you any poker dice, Tom?"

"Yes, I have a couple of sets somewhere."

"Very well then, we'll take a single one and the first man that throws Queen is the winner."

I found the dice and the leather cup and dropped a single one into it. Poker dice, for the benefit of the uninitiate, have the Queen on one side in blue, like the Queen in a pack of cards, the King in red and the Knave in black. On two other faces, the nine and the ten.

"Who will throw first?" said Pat.

"You throw," I said.

There was a rattle, and nine fell upon the table. I nodded to Arthur, who picked up the little ivory square, waved the cup in the air, and threw—an ace.

My turn came. I threw an ace also, and Arthur and I looked at Pat with sinking hearts.

He threw a King. I don't want another five minutes like that again. We threw and threw and threw and never once did the Queen turn up. At last Arthur said:

"Look here, you fellows, I can't stand this much longer, it's playing the devil with my nerves. Let's have one more throw and if Her Majesty doesn't turn up, let's decide it

by values. Ace, highest, King, Queen and so on. Tom, your turn."

I took up the box, rattled the cube within it for a long time and then dropped it flat upon the table.

I had thrown Queen.

CHAPTER TWO

About a fortnight after the memorable scene in my flat when the league came into being, I was sitting in my editorial room at the offices of the *Evening Special.*

I had met Juanita once at a large dinner party and exchanged half a dozen words with her—that was all. My head was full of plans, I was trying to map out a social campaign that would give me the opportunity I longed for, but as yet everything was tentative and incomplete. The exciting business of journalism, the keeping of one's thumb upon the public pulse, the directing of public thought into this or that channel, was most welcome at a time like this, and I threw myself into it with avidity.

I had just returned from lunch, and the first editions of the paper were successfully afloat, when Williams, my acting editor, and Miss Dewsbury, my private secretary, came into my room.

"Things are very quiet indeed," said Williams.

"But the circulation is all right?"

"Never better. Still, I am thinking of our reputation, Sir Thomas."

I knew what he meant. We had never allowed the *Evening Special*—highly successful as it was—to go on in a jog-trot fashion. We had a tremendous reputation for great "stunts," genuine, exclusive pieces of news, and now for weeks nothing particular had come our way.

"That's all very well, Williams, but we cannot make bricks without straw, and if everything is as stagnant as a duck pond, that's not our fault."

Miss Dewsbury broke in. She was a little woman of thirty with a large head, fair hair drawn tightly from a rather prominent brow, and wore tortoise-shell spectacles. She looked as if her clothes had been flung at her and had stuck, but for all that Julia Dewsbury was the best private secretary in London, true as steel, with an inordinate capacity for work and an immense love for the paper. I think she liked me a little too, and she was well worth the four hundred a year I paid her.

"I," said Miss Dewsbury, "live at Richmond."

Both Williams and I cocked our ears. Julia never wasted words, but she liked to tell her story her own way, and it was best to let her do so.

"Ah!" said Williams appreciatively.

"And I believe," she went on, "that one of the biggest newspaper stories, ever, is going to come from Richmond. It is something that will go round the world, if I am not very much mistaken, and we've got to have it first, Sir Thomas."

Williams gave a low whistle, and I strained at the leash, so to speak.

"I refer," Miss Dewsbury went on, "to the great wireless erections on Richmond Hill."

For a moment I felt disappointed. I didn't see how interest could be revived in that matter and I said so.

"Nearly a year ago," I remarked, "every paper in Eng-

land was booming with it. We did our share, I'm sure. No one could have protested more vigorously, and it was the *Special* that got all those questions asked in Parliament. But surely, Miss Dewsbury, it's dead as mutton now. It's an accepted fact and the public have got used to it."

"There's nothing," said Williams, "more impossible than to reanimate a dead bit of news. It's been tried over and over again and it's never been a real success."

Miss Dewsbury smiled, the smile that means "When you poor dear, silly men have done talking, then you shall hear something." I saw that smile and took courage again.

"Suppose," said Miss Dewsbury, "that we just look up the facts as a preliminary to what I have to say."

She went to a side table on which was a dial with little ivory tablets, each bearing a name—Sub-editor's room, Composing room, Mr. Williams, Library, etc., and she pulled a little handle over the last disk, immediately speaking into a telephone receiver above.

"Facts relating to great wireless installment on Richmond Hill."

A bell whirred and she came back to the table where we were sitting. In twenty seconds—so perfect was our organization at the *Special* office—a youth entered with a portfolio containing a number of Press cuttings, photographs, etc.

Miss Dewsbury opened it.

"A year ago," she said, "the real estate market was greatly interested to learn that Flight, Jones & Rutley, the well-known agents, had secured several acres of property

on the top of Richmond Hill. The buyer's name was not discovered, but an enormously wealthy syndicate was suggested. At that time, opportunely chosen, many leases had fallen in. Others that had some time still to run were bought at a greatly enhanced value, while several portions of freehold property were also purchased at ten times their worth. Houses immediately began to be demolished, immense compensation was paid to those who hung out and refused to quit the newly purchased area. Pressure, it is hinted, of a somewhat unwarrantable kind, was also applied. The sum involved was enormous, but every claim was cheerfully settled, with the result that this area of several acres was entirely denuded of buildings and surrounded by a high wall, in an incredibly short space of time."

"The most beautiful view in England spoiled forever!" said Williams with a sigh.

Miss Dewsbury turned over a few leaves.

"Of course you will both remember the agitation that went on, the opposition of the local and County Councils, the rage of Societies for preserving the ancient monuments and historic places of interest, etc., etc. The newspapers, including ours, took up the matter vigorously. Then, with a curious unanimity, all opposition began to die away. It is quite certain that huge sums were spent in buying over the objectors, though no actual proof was ever discovered. The matter was altogether too delicate a thing and was far too skillfully worked.

"Then the unknown purchaser began to build the three

great towers now approaching completion. An army of workmen was gathered together in a new industrial city between Brentford and Hounslow. Fleets of ships bearing steel girders and so forth arrived from America, together with a hundred highly trained engineers, all of them Americans. It was given out that the most powerful wireless station in the whole world was to be constructed. Again much opposition, appeals to the Government, questions to the Board of Trade and so forth. I remember that very much the same sort of thing happened in Paris, when the Eiffel Tower was first constructed. England's agitation was opposed by the scientific bodies of the day, and there were other forces behind which brought pressure to bear on the Government. That also is certain, though nothing has actually transpired as yet in this regard. Now we've three monstrous towers, *each of nearly two thousand feet in height* —twice the height of the Eiffel—dominating London. Every day almost we, who live in Richmond and the surrounding towns, see these monsters shooting up higher into the air. Often half of them is veiled by clouds. The most tremendous engineering feat in the history of the world is nearly accomplished."

Now all this was quite familiar to me and in common with many Londoners I had begun to take a sort of lazy pride in the gaunt latticework of steel which seemed climbing to heaven itself. All the same I saw no great journalistic opportunity and I said so.

"Let us consider a little," continued the imperturbable Julia. "These towers are *not* Government owned. They

are the property of some private syndicate. The secret has been kept with extraordinary success. All the Marconi shareholders of the City, all the big financial corporations, even foreign Governments, have been trying to get at the root of the matter. Each and all have utterly failed. Yet our own Government knows, and sooner or later a pronouncement will have to be made. If we could anticipate this, then the interest of the public would rise to fever heat again, and we should have a scoop of the first magnitude."

I saw that immediately, and so did Williams, but as it was obvious Miss Dewsbury hadn't quite finished we just nodded and let her go on.

"Now I have reason for thinking," she said, "and I am not speaking lightly, Sir Thomas, that there's something behind this affair of a totally unexpected and startling nature. Some day, no doubt, the towers will be used for scientific purposes, but there's a deep mystery surrounding everything, and one very different from what we might suppose. I think we can penetrate it."

"Splendid!" I cried, for I knew very well that Julia Dewsbury would not say as much as she had unless there was certainty behind her words. "And how do you propose to start work?"

As I was looking at her she flushed, and I nearly fell off my chair. It had never occurred to me that Miss Dewsbury could blush, in fact, that she was human at all, I am afraid, and I wondered what on earth was the matter.

"May I make a little personal explanation, Sir Thomas?"

she said. "I live in a quiet street at the foot of Richmond Hill, where I occupy a large and comfortable bed-sitting room in 'Balmoral,' Number 102, Acacia Road. The house is kept by an excellent woman, who only takes in one other lodger. You pay me a very handsome salary, Sir Thomas, and I might be expected to live in a more commodious way —a flat in Kensington or something like that. But I have other claims upon me. There are two young sisters and a brother to be educated, and I am their sole support. That's why I live in a small lodging house at Richmond, which, again, is the reason that I have recently come into contact with some one who may be of inestimable value to the paper."

She blushed again, upon my soul she did, and I heard Williams gasp in astonishment. I kicked him, under the table.

"The other bed-sitting room at 'Balmoral' has recently been occupied by a young man, perhaps I should rather say a youth, Mr. William Rolston. He seemed very lonely and quite poor, and on discussing him with Mrs. O'Hagan, my landlady, she informed me that she more than suspected that he had at times to economize grievously in the matter of food. I myself used to hear the click of a typewriter across the passage, sometimes continuing till late at night, and from the frequency with which bulky envelopes arrived for him by post, it was easy to deduce that he was an unsuccessful author or journalist. This naturally excited my interest. Mrs. O'Hagan has no idea that I am connected with the *Evening Special,* she thinks I am typist in a city

firm of hardware merchants. And when I made my acquaintance with Mr. Rolston, as I did some time ago owing to his back number Remington going wrong, I told him nothing but that I myself was a typist and stenographer. I was enabled to put his machine right and we became friends. Am I boring you, Sir Thomas, and Mr. Williams?" she said suddenly, with a quick look at both of us.

"On the contrary," I replied, "you are paying us a great compliment, Miss Dewsbury, in allowing us to know something of your own private affairs in order that you may explain how you propose to do the paper a signal service."

I can swear that the little woman's eyes grew bright behind her tortoise-shell spectacles and she went on with renewed confidence of manner.

"I have been associated with journalism for eight years now," she said. "During that time innumerable journalists have passed before me. In my own way I have studied them all, and I believe I can detect the real journalist almost as well as Mr. Williams can."

"A good deal better, I should think," said the acting editor, "considering the people I have trusted and the mistakes I have sometimes made."

"At any rate, I can say, with my whole heart, that Bill —I mean Mr. Rolston—though he is only twenty-one and has never had a chance in his life yet, has the makings in him of the most successful journalist of the day. He will rise to the very top of the tree. But as we all know, though great merit will come to the surface in time, chance is a

great element in retarding or accelerating the process. I think that Mr. Rolston's chance has come now."

"You mean?" I asked.

"That this boy, utterly unknown, with hardly a left foot in Fleet Street as yet, has had the acumen to see, right to his hand, one of the greatest journalistic sensations of modern times. I refer to the three towers on Richmond Hill. We have been for evening strolls together and the boy has poured out his whole heart to me—as he might to a mother or any older woman"—and here poor Julia blushed again, and I thought I saw her lips quiver for a moment.

"The day before yesterday he said to me: 'Miss Dewsbury, of course you don't understand anything about journalism, but I'm on the track of the very biggest thing you could possibly imagine. I have been lying low and saying nothing. I'm hot on the scent.' He hinted at what it was, without giving me very many details, though these were quite sufficient to show me that he was making no idle boast. Then he said: 'But what use is it? If I went with what I've got already to any of the papers, I might or might not get to see some unimaginative news-editor who'd squash me into a cocked hat in five minutes. That's the worst of being absolutely unknown and without any pull. If only I could get to see a real editor of one of the big papers, a man who would give me a patient hearing, a man with imagination, I would engage to convince him in ten minutes and my fortune would be made.' "

She stopped, leant back in her chair and looked at me inquiringly.

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Have him up *at once.* I am quite certain that you could never have been deceived, Miss Dewsbury. You have not been with me for four years without my knowing how valuable your intuition is. Send him to me at once."

Miss Dewsbury gave a dry, gratified chuckle.

"I may have stretched things a little far in having too much confidence in my position here," she said, "but I was determined to gamble on it, and I've won. This morning, before I left for the office, I gave Mrs. O'Hagan a little note for Bill—he has an unfortunate habit of lying in bed in the morning. The note told him that by an odd coincidence, I thought I might put him in the way of writing an article for the *Evening Special* and that he was to be in the café at the corner by three o'clock, precisely."

She looked at her wrist-watch.

"It's five minutes to now. I will send for him at once."

"Rolston, did you say the name was, Miss Dewsbury?" said Williams.

"Yes,—Rolston. But the messenger can't mistake him. He's about five feet two high, very slim, with an innocent, baby face, and very dark red hair. Oh, and his ears stick out at the sides of his head almost at right angles. Please say nothing about my part in the matter, as yet at any rate," Miss Dewsbury asked as she went away, and some minutes afterwards a page boy ushered in one of the most curious little figures I have ever seen.

Mr. Rolston was short, slim and well proportioned. He looked active as a monkey and tough as whipcord. He was rather shabbily dressed in an old blue suit. His face was childish only in contour and complexion, and for the rest he could have sat as a model for Puck to any painter. There was something impish and merry in his rather slanting eyes, and his button of a mouth was capable of some very surprising contortions. His round-shaped ears, like the ears of a mouse, stood out on each side of his head and completed the elfish, sprite-like impression.

"Sit down, Mr. Rolston," I said, pointing to a chair on the other side of the table.

The little man bowed very low and slid into the chair. I had an odd impression that he would shortly produce a nut and begin to crack it with his teeth. I could see that he was in a whirl of amazement and at the same time horribly nervous, and I tried to put him at his ease.

"I understand," I said, "that you are a journalist, Mr. Rolston."

"Yes, Sir Thomas," he replied, in a cultivated voice, though with a curious guttural note in it, and I marked that he knew my name.

"I also understand—never mind how—that for some time past you have been wishing to see the editor of a large London daily, to penetrate right to the fountain head, so to speak. Well, here you are, I am the editor of the *Evening Special*. What have you to propose to me?"

I passed a box of cigarettes over the table towards him, but he shook his head.

"It's about the three great towers now approaching completion at Richmond."

"You have some special information?"

"Some very startling information, indeed, Sir Thomas. An idea came to me some months ago. I thought it worth while testing, and it's proved trumps."

"If you have anything in the nature of a scoop, Mr. Rolston, I need hardly say that it will be very well worth your while. If, when I have heard what you have to say, I cannot use your information, I will give you my personal word that all you tell me shall be kept an entire secret."

"That's good enough for any one," he answered with a sudden grin. "Well, sir, these towers will eventually lapse to the British Government as a gift from the private individual who has erected them, but they will remain his property and be used for his own purposes until his death. And these purposes are not wireless telegraphy, or even scientific in any shape or form. Indeed, wireless telegraphy is expressly forbidden."

Well, at that I sat upright in my chair. Here was news indeed—if it were true.

"That's big stuff," I replied at once, "if you can substantiate it."

"I think you will believe me when I have finished," he replied quietly. "I have risked my life more than once to get at the facts. My father, Sir Thomas, was a missionary in China. I was brought up to speak the Chinese lan-

guage as well as English. I am one of the very few Europeans who do so fluently. Moreover, I kept it up till I was sixteen and came to England, and I have never forgotten it. You have heard, I suppose, that there's a gang of Chinese coolies at work on the towers, and some of the Trade Unions have been making themselves nasty about it, and the American labor?"

"Yes, there was some agitation."

"In addition to these coolies, there are many Chinese officials of a much higher class, people who will remain when the towers are finished, as they will be in an incredibly short space of time, for the work is being carried on both by day and night. Speed, speed, speed! is the order, and nothing in the world is allowed to stand in the way of it."

"You interest me very much. Please continue."

"Speaking Chinese as I do, being perfectly familiar with Chinese dress and customs, it has not been difficult for me to disguise myself—blacken my hair, assume a yellow complexion and so forth.

"By this means I have penetrated to the very heart of the workings at night, and," he blushed faintly, "I have listened to conversations of an extraordinary character, lying on the roof of a certain office building for hours. Details you shall have, and in plenty, but here is the sum of my discoveries. There is no syndicate. There never was. The work, upon which millions have been spent, has been, from the very first, designed and originated by one individual,

with the specialized help of the most famous engineers of America."

"And his motive?" I asked, and I don't mind saying that I was almost trembling with excitement.

"The dream of a genius, or the whim of a madman," Rolston answered in a grave voice. "The world will call it one or the other without a doubt. At any rate it's the product of a colossal imagination. For myself, I am dead certain that there's some deeper and stranger motive beneath it all, but that can rest for the present. Sir Thomas, between those three great towers, two thousand feet up in the air, will very shortly come into being a fantastic pleasure city like a dream of the Arabian Nights! It will be unique in the history of the world, and already the preparations are so far advanced that it will be completed with extraordinary rapidity."

"A pleasure city!" I gasped. "A Pleasure City in the Clouds!"

"On two stages right up at the very summit, suspended by a system of cantilevers of the most intricate modern construction and of toughened steel. I understand that a triangle measuring in all four acres will support a marvelous series of palaces, a Lhassa of the air!"

"Why Lhassa, Mr. Rolston?"

"Because," he replied, "it's to be a Forbidden City, which no one will be allowed to penetrate or see. It is a marvelous conception only possible to enormous wealth and the vision of a superman."

I left my chair and began pacing up and down the room

as the freakish grandeur of the conception burst fully upon me. Towering over London, dwarfing Saint Paul's to a child's toy, a City in the Clouds!

I stopped suddenly, wheeled round and shouted: "But who, Mr. Rolston, is the madman, genius or superman who has imagined this and actually carried it out in sober twentieth-century England?"

"That's the greatest secret of all," he said, looking round the room as if frightened.

Then he slid from his chair and was at my side in a moment.

"It's a Mr. Gideon Mendoza Morse from Brazil," he whispered.

CHAPTER THREE

Rolston's revelation, utterly unexpected, came to me with the suddenness of a blow over the heart. For a few seconds I was incapable of consecutive thought, though I don't think my face showed anything of it.

The lad was watching me anxiously and I had to do something with him at once. Fortunately, I thought of the obvious thing.

"Leave me now, Mr. Rolston," I said. "Go to the room down the passage marked 'Mr. Williams' on the door, and ask him to put you into a room by yourself. Then please, as quickly as possible, write me out a newspaper 'story' setting out fully all the facts you have told me. Remember that you've got to interest the public in the very first paragraph in what is undoubtedly a most sensational piece of news."

"How many words, sir?" he asked me—I liked that, it was professional.

"A thousand. And when you've done that bring it straight in to me."

He was out of the room in a minute and I sat down to think.

In the first place I didn't doubt his story for a moment, there was something transparently honest about the boy, and, unless I was very much mistaken, there was great ability in him also. When there was time for it I expected

I should hear a breathless story of his adventures in the search of this stuff. He had hinted that his life had been in danger. . . . I began to think—hard. Assuming that was true, that Morse had been seized with this extraordinary whim, how did I stand in the matter? At a first view it appeared that I was rather badly snookered. Morse, always assuming young Rolston was correct, had spent a huge fortune in keeping his secret. Moreover, the Government was in it with him. It would hardly be the way to recommend myself to Juanita's father—whose good opinion I desired to gain more than that of any other person in the world, save one—by giving his cherished secret to the world in order to increase the prestige and circulation of the *Evening Special*.

If I did publish it, it was odds on that I never saw Juanita again. One thing occurred to me with relief—it wasn't a case in which I *had* to publish, in the public interest. By suppressing news I was not failing my duty as an editor, only losing a big scoop, though that was hard enough. What was to be done? As I asked myself that question I confess that for a brief moment—thank Heaven it did not last long—it occurred to me that I was now in a position to put considerable pressure upon the millionaire. I could hold out inducements . . .

Fortunately, I crushed all such ugly thoughts without much effort, and then the real solution came. When I had questioned Rolston a little more and was bedrock certain that he was right, I would see Morse at once and tell him all I had learnt without reserve. I would present

the thing to him as one in which I claimed no personal interest, and my attitude would be that I felt he ought to be warned. I would engage to publish nothing without his wish, but he must look to it—if he wished to preserve his secret—that other people were not upon the same track. That could do me no harm whatever. It was the straight thing to do, and at the same time it would certainly help me with him. I thought, and think still, that this was a fair advantage to take. It is only a fool who throws away a legitimate weapon in love or war.

I rang up the Ritz Hotel and asked for Mr. Morse. There was some little delay at the Hotel Bureau, and then I was switched on to the telephone of the private apartments.

"Who's that?" asked a cold, characterless voice.

"Sir Thomas Kirby of the *Evening Special* speaking. Who are you?"

"Secretary to Mr. Morse"—now the voice was a little warmer.

"Is Mr. Morse at home?"

"I can see that he gets a message very shortly, Sir Thomas, if the matter is of importance."

"It is of very considerable importance or I shouldn't have troubled to ring Mr. Morse up, especially as I shall be meeting him in a day or two at a social engagement."

"Wait a moment, please."

I knew by this that I had struck lucky and that Morse was in the hotel, and within a minute I heard his calm, resonant voice in my ear.

"Good afternoon, Kirby. My secretary says you wanted to speak to me."

"Thank you, I am most anxious to have a conversation."

"Well, shall we hold the wire?"

"I daren't discuss my business over the wire, Mr. Morse."

There was a short silence and then:

"Please forgive me, but you know how busy I am. Could you give me the least indication of what you wish to talk to me about?"

I had an inspiration.

"Towers," I said in a low voice.

A quiet "Ah!" came to me over the wire, and then:

"I think I understand, Sir Thomas, you wish—?"

"To tell you something that I feel sure you ought to know, in your own interests."

"Pass, *Friend!*" was the reply, followed by a little chuckle in which I thought—I might have been mistaken—I detected a note of relief.

"When shall we meet?" I asked.

"Look here, Kirby," was the reply, "can you come here at eleven to-night? I'll give orders that you are to be taken up to my rooms at once. I can't guarantee that I shall be in at the moment. I also have something of considerable importance on hand, but if you will wait—I'm afraid I'm asking a great deal—I'll be certain to be with you sooner or later. My daughter may be at home and, if she is, no doubt she'll give you a cup of coffee or something while you wait. Do you think you can manage this?"

"I shall be delighted," I answered, trying to control my

voice, and I hardly heard the quiet "Good-by" that concluded our conversation.

Well, I had done better for myself than I had hoped, and, so vain are all of us, I felt a kind of satisfaction in having "played the game" and at the same time won the trick. I did not reflect till afterwards that if Morse had been some one else and not the father of Juanita, I should not have hesitated for a moment to fill the *Special* with scare headlines.

I sat down again in my chair, ordered a cup of tea, drank it with splendid visions of a *tête-à-tête* with Juanita that very night, and was leaning back in my chair lost in a rosy dream when the door opened and the odd little man with the red hair appeared at my side, holding two or three sheets of typewritten copy.

"The story, sir," he said.

I took it from him mechanically, it would never be published now, in all probability, but it would at least serve to show Morse how much I knew. I began to read.

At the end of the first paragraph I knew that the stuff was going to be all right. At the end of the second and third I sat up in my chair and abandoned my easy attitude. When I had read the whole of the thousand words I knew that I had discovered one of the best journalistic brains of the day! The boy could not only ferret out news, but he could *write!* Every word fell with the right ring and chimed. He was terse, but vivid as an Alpine sunset. He made one powerful word do the work of ten. He suggested atmosphere by a semicolon, and there were fewer adjec-

tives in his stuff than one would have believed possible. There were not four other men in Fleet Street who could have done as well. And beyond this, beyond my pleasure at the discovery of a genius, the article had a peculiar effect upon me. I felt that somehow or other the matter was not going to die with my interview to-night at the Ritz Hotel. The room in which I sat widened. There was a glimpse of far horizons. . . .

I folded the copy carefully and placed it in my breast pocket.

"Mr. Rolston," I said, "I engage you from this moment as a member of my regular staff. Your salary to begin with will be ten pounds a week, and of course your expenses that you may incur in the course of your work. Do you accept these terms?"

Poor Bill Rolston! I mustn't give away the man who afterwards became my most faithful friend and most daring companion in hours of frightful peril, and a series of incredible adventures. Still, if he *did* burst into tears that's nothing against him, for I didn't realize till sometime afterwards that he was half starved and at the very end of his tether.

He pulled himself together in a moment or two, took a cup of tea and let me cross-question him. What he told me in the next half-hour I cannot set down here. It will appear in its proper place, but it is enough to say that in the whole of my experience I never listened to a more mysterious and more enthralling recital.

I think that from that moment I realized that my fate

was to be in some way linked with the three towers on Richmond Hill, and the sense of excitement which had been with me all the afternoon, grew till it was almost unbearable.

"Now, first of all," I said, when he had told me everything, "you are not to breathe a word of this to any human soul without my permission. While you have been absent I have already been taking steps, the nature of which I shall not tell you at present. Meanwhile, lock up everything in your heart."

I had a flash of foresight, well justified in the event.

"I may want you at any moment," I told him, "and therefore, with your permission, I'm going to put you up at my flat in Piccadilly, where you will be well looked after and have everything you want. I'll telephone through to my man, Preston, giving him full instructions, and you had better take a taxi and get there at once. Preston will send a messenger to your lodgings to bring up any clothes and so forth you may require."

He blushed rosy red, and I wondered why, for his story had been told to me in a crisp, man-of-the-world manner that made him seem far older than he was.

Then he shrugged his shoulders, put his hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out—one penny.

"All I have in the world," he said, with a rueful smile.

I scribbled an order on the cashier and told him to cash it in the office below, and, with a look of almost doglike fidelity and gratitude, the little fellow moved towards the door.

Just at that moment it opened and Julia Dewsbury came in.

Rolston's jaw dropped and his eyes almost started out of his head in amazement, and I saw a look come into my secretary's eyes that I should have been glad to inspire in the eyes of one woman.

"There, there," I said, "be off with you, both of you. Miss Dewsbury, take Mr. Rolston, now a permanent member of the staff, into your own room and tell him something about the ways of the office."

For half an hour I walked up and down the editorial sanctum arranging my thoughts, getting everything clear cut, and when that was done I telephoned to Arthur Winstanley, asking him, if he had nothing particular on, to dine with me.

His reply was that he would be delighted, as he had nothing to do till eleven o'clock, but that I must dine with him. "I have discovered a delightful little restaurant," he said, "which isn't fashionable yet, though it soon will be. Don't dress; and meet me at the Club at half-past seven."

. . . . . .

My dinner with Arthur can be related very shortly, for, while it has distinct bearing upon the story, it was only remarkable for one incident, though, Heaven knows, that was important enough.

I met him at our Club in Saint James' and we walked together towards Soho.

"You are going to dine," said Arthur, "at 'L'Escargot d'Or'—The Golden Snail. It's a new departure in Soho

restaurants, and only a few of us know of it yet. Soon all the world will be going there, for the cooking is magnificent."

"That's always the way with these Soho restaurants, they begin wonderfully, are most beautifully select in their patrons, and then the rush comes and everything is spoiled."

"I know, the same will happen here no doubt, though lower Bohemia will never penetrate because the prices are going to be kept up; and this place will always equal one of the first-class restaurants in town. Well, how goes it?"

I knew what he meant and as we walked I told him, as in duty bound, all there was to tell of the progress of my suit.

"Met her once," I said, "had about two minutes' talk. There's just a chance, I am not certain, that I may meet her to-night, and not in a crowd—in which case you may be sure I shall make the very most of my opportunities. If this doesn't come off, I don't see any other chance of really getting to know her until September, at Sir Walter Stileman's, and I have to thank you for that invitation, Arthur."

He sighed.

"It's a difficult house to get into," he said, "unless you are one of the pukka shooting set, but I told old Sir Walter that, though you weren't much good in October and that pheasants weren't in your line, you were A1 at driven 'birds.'"

"But I can't hit a driven partridge to save my life, unless by a fluke!"

"I know, Tom, I don't say that you'll be liked at all, but you won the toss and by our bond we're bound to do all we can to give you your opportunity. I need hardly say that my greatest hope in life is that she'll have nothing whatever to say to you. And now let's change that subject—it's confounded thin ice however you look at it—and enjoy our little selves. I have been on the 'phone with Anatole, and we are going to *dine* to-night, my son, really *dine!*"

The Golden Snail in a Soho side street presented no great front to the world. There was a sign over a door, a dingy passage to be traversed, until one came to another door, opened it and found oneself in a long, lofty room shaped like a capital L. The long arm was the one at which you entered, the other went round a rectangle. The place was very simply decorated in black and white. Tables ran along each side, and the only difference between it and a dozen other such places in the foreign quarter of London was that the seats against the wall were not of red plush but of dark green morocco leather. It was fairly full, of a mixed company, but long-haired and impecunious Bohemia was conspicuously absent.

A table had been reserved for us at the other end opposite the door, so that sitting there we could see in both directions.

We started with little tiny oysters from Belon in Brittany—I don't suppose there was another restaurant in London at that moment that was serving them. The soup was asparagus cream soup of superlative excellence, and

then came a young guinea-fowl stuffed with mushrooms, which was perfection itself.

"How on earth do you find these places, Arthur?" I asked.

"Well," he answered, "ever since I left Oxford I've been going about London and Paris gathering information of all sorts. I've lived among the queerest set of people in Europe. My father thinks I'm a waster, but he doesn't know. My mother, angel that she is, understands me perfectly. She knows that I've only postponed going into politics until I have had more experience than the ordinary young man in my position gets. I absolutely refused to be shoved into the House directly I had come down with my degree, the Union, and all those sort of blushing honors thick upon me. In a year or two you will see, Tom, and meanwhile here's the Moulin à Vent."

Anatole poured out that delightful but little known burgundy for us himself, and it was a wine for the gods.

"A little interval," said Arthur, "in which a cigarette is clearly indicated, and then we are to have some slices of bear ham, stewed in champagne, which I *rather* think will please you."

We sat and smoked, looking up the long room, when the swing doors at the end opened and a man and a girl entered. They came down towards us, obviously approaching a table reserved for them in the short arm of the restaurant, and I noticed the man at once.

For one thing he was in full evening dress, whereas the only other diners who were in evening kit at all wore dinner

jackets and black ties. He was a tall man of about fifty with wavy, gray hair. His face was clean shaved, and a little full. I thought I had never seen a handsomer man, or one who moved with a grace and ease which were so perfectly unconscious. The girl beside him was a pretty enough young creature with a powdered face and reddened lips—nothing about her in the least out of the ordinary. When he came opposite our table, his face lighted up suddenly. He smiled at Arthur, and opened his mouth as if to speak.

Arthur looked him straight in the face with a calm and stony stare—I never saw a more cruel or explicit cut.

The man smiled again without the least bravado or embarrassment, gave an almost imperceptible bow and passed on towards his table without any one but ourselves having noticed what occurred. The whole affair was a question of some five or six seconds.

He sat down with his back to us.

"Who is he?" I asked of Arthur.

He hesitated for a moment and then he gave a little shudder of disgust. I thought, also, that I saw a shade come upon his face.

"No one you are ever likely to meet in life, Tom," he replied, "unless you go to see him tried for murder at the Old Bailey some day. He is a fellow called Mark Antony Midwinter."

"A most distinguished looking man."

"Yes, and I should say he stands out from even his own associates in a preëminence of evil. Tom," he went on, with

unusual gravity, "deep down in the soul of every man there's some foul primal thing, some troglodyte that, by the mercy of God, never awakes in most of us. But when it does in some, and dominates them, then a man becomes a fiend, lost, hopeless, irremediable. That man Midwinter is such an one. You could not find his like in Europe. He walks among his fellows with a panther in his soul; and the high imagination, the artistic power in him makes him doubly dangerous. I could tell you details of his career which would make your blood run cold—if it were worth while. It isn't.

"But I perceive our bear's flesh stewed in Sillery is approaching. Let's forget this intrusion."

Well, we dined after the fashion of Sybaris, went to the Club for an hour and smoked, and then Arthur returned to his chambers in Jermyn Street to dress. I went back to mine, found from Preston that little Mr. Rolston was safely in bed and fast asleep, changed into a dinner jacket and walked the few yards to the Ritz Hotel, my heart beating high with hope.

I was shown up at once to the floor inhabited by the millionaire, and knew, therefore, that I was expected. The man who conducted me knocked at a door, opened it, and I entered. I found myself in a comfortable room with writing tables and desks, telephone and a typewriter. A young man of two or three and twenty was seated at one of the tables smoking a cigarette.

He jumped up at once.

"Oh, Sir Thomas," he said, "Mr. Morse has not yet

returned, and I think it quite likely he may be some little time. But the Señora Balmaceda and Miss Morse are in the drawing-room and perhaps you would like to—"

"I shall be delighted," I said, cutting him short, but who on earth was Señora Balmaceda? The chaperone, I supposed, confound it!

The obliging young man led me through two or three very gorgeously furnished rooms and at last into a large apartment brilliantly lit from the roof, and with flowers everywhere. At one end was a little alcove.

"I have brought Sir Thomas, Señora," he said, looking about the room, but there was no one remotely resembling a Señora there. Nevertheless, directly he spoke, some one stepped out of the conservatory from behind a tropical shrub in a green tub, and came towards us.

It was Juanita, and she was alone. The secretary withdrew and I advanced to meet her.

"How do you do, Sir Thomas," she said in her beautiful, bell-like voice. "Father said you might be coming and I'm afraid he won't be in just yet. And it's so tiresome, poor Auntie has gone to bed with a bad headache."

"I'm very sorry, Miss Morse," I answered as we shook hands, "I must do what I can to take her place," and then I looked at her perfectly straight.

Yes, I dared to look into those marvelous limpid eyes and I know she saw the hunger in mine, for she took her hand away a little hurriedly.

"What a charming room! Is that a little conservatory over there? It must look out over the Green Park?"

"Yes, it does," she replied almost in a whisper.

"Then do let's sit there, Miss Morse."

Was I acting in a play or what on earth gave me this sense of confidence and strength? Heaven only knows, but I never faltered from the first moment that I entered the room. Oh, the gods were with me that night!

We went to the alcove without a further word, and she sat down upon a couch. I have described her once, at Lady Brentford's ball, but at this moment I am not going to attempt to describe her at all.

For half a minute we said nothing and then I took her hand and pressed it to my lips.

"Juanita," I said, "there are mysterious currents and forces in this world stronger than we are ourselves. This is the third time that I've seen you, but no power on earth can prevent me from telling you—"

She was looking at me with parted lips and eyes suffused with an angelic tenderness and modesty. My voice broke in my throat with unutterable joy. I was certain that she loved me.

And then, just as I was about to say the sealing words—remember, I had invoked the gods—there was the sound of a door opening sharply.

I stiffened and rose to my feet. From where we sat we could survey the whole, rich room. Through the open door—I must say there were several doors in the room—came a tall man, *walking backwards*.

He was in full evening dress with a camellia in his buttonhole.

He stepped back lightly with cat-like steps, his arms a little curved, his fingers all extended.

I saw his face. It was convulsed with the satanic fury of an old Japanese mask. Line for line, it was just like that, and it was also the face of the bland and smiling man I had seen two hours before at the restaurant of The Golden Snail.

I felt something warm and trembling at my side, Juanita was clinging to me and I put my arm around her waist. Through the open door there now came another figure.

A quiet, resonant voice cut into the tense, horrible silence.

"Quick, Mark Antony Midwinter—that's your door, quick —quick!"

The big man paused for an instant and a hissing spitting noise came from his mouth.

There was a sharp crack and a great mirror on the wall shivered in pieces. There was another, and then the big man turned and literally bounded over the soft carpet, flung himself through the door and disappeared.

Gideon Mendoza Morse advanced into the drawing-room, smiling to himself and looking down at a little steel-blue automatic in his hand.

Then Juanita and I came out of the alcove, hand in hand, and he saw us.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gideon Morse still had the little steel-blue automatic pistol in his hand. He was actually smiling and humming a little tune when he turned and saw Juanita and myself coming out of the alcove.

In a flash his hand dropped the pistol into the pocket of his dinner jacket and his face changed.

"Santa Maria!" he said in Spanish, and then, "Juanita, Sir Thomas Kirby!"

"You remember you gave me an appointment to-night, Mr. Morse," I stammered.

"Of course, of course, then—"

He said no more, for with a little gasp Juanita sank into a heap upon the floor. We had loosened hands directly the millionaire turned towards us and I was too late to catch her.

Morse was at her side in an instant.

"The bell," he said curtly, and I ran to the side of the room and pressed the button hard and long.

Wow! but these money emperors of the world are well served! In a second, so it seemed, the room was full of people. The young secretary, a couple of maids, a dark foreign-looking man in a morning coat and a black tie whom I took to be the valet, and finally a gigantic fellow in tweeds with a battered face as big as a ham and arms which reached almost to his knees.

The maids were at the girl's side in a moment, applying restoratives. Morse rose, just as another door opened and in sailed a stout elderly lady in a black evening dress with a mantilla of black lace over her abundant and ivory white hair. Morse said something to her in Spanish and I wished I had been Arthur Winstanley to understand it. Then I felt my arm taken and Morse drew me away.

"It is nothing serious," he said, "just a little shock," and as he said it he made a slight gesture with his head.

It was enough. The secretary, the valet, and the huge, vulgar-looking man in tweeds faded away in an instant, though not before I had seen the latter spot the broken mirror, and a ferocious glint come into his eyes. Nor did he look surprised.

Juanita began to come to herself and she was tenderly carried away by the women. Morse accompanied them and spoke in a rapid whisper to the distinguished old lady, who, I knew, must be the Señora Balmaceda.

The two of us were left alone, and for my part I sank down in an adjacent chair quite exhausted in mind, if not in body, by the happenings of the last ten minutes. Up to the present—I will say nothing of the future—I had never lived so fast or so much in such a short space of time; and you've got to get accustomed to that sort of thing really to enjoy it!

"I'm afraid your visit has been somewhat exciting," said my host, in his musical, level voice. His eyes were as dark and inscrutable as ever, but nevertheless, I saw that the man was badly moved. He took a slim, gold cigarette case

from his waistcoat pocket and his hand trembled. Moreover, under the tan of his skin he was as white as a ghost—there was a curious gray effect.

I laughed.

"I confess to having been a little startled. Your secretary brought me in here and I was talking to Miss Morse in the conservatory when—" I hesitated for a moment.

He saved me the trouble of going on.

"I guess," he said, "you and I had better have a little drink now," and he went to the wall.

I don't pretend to know how the service was managed—I suppose there was a sergeant-major somewhere in the background who drilled the host of personal and hotel attendances who ministered to the wants of Gideon Morse. At any rate, this time no one entered but one of the hotel footmen, and he brought the usual tray of cut-glass bottles, etc.

Morse mixed us both a brandy and soda and I noticed two things. First, his hand was steady again; secondly, the brandy was not decanted but came out of a bottle, on which was the fleur-de-lys of ancient, royal France, blown into the glass.

There was a twinkle in his eye when he saw I had spotted that.

"Yes," he said, "there are only three dozen bottles left, even in the Ritz. They were found in a bricked-up cellar of the Tuileries," and he tossed off his glass with relish.

So did I—Cleopatra's pearls were not so expensive.

"Now look here, Sir Thomas," Morse said, sitting down

by me and drawing up his chair, "you've seen something to-night of a very unfortunate nature. You've seen it quite by accident. If news of it got about, if it were even whispered through a certain section of London, then the very gravest harm might result, not only to me but to many other persons also."

"My dear sir, I have seen nothing. I have heard nothing. You may place implicit reliance upon that," and I held out my hand to him, which he took in a firm grip.

"Thank you, Sir Thomas," he replied simply. "It was a question," he hesitated for the fraction of a second, and I knew he was lying, "it was a question of impudent blackmail. I had expected something of the sort and was prepared. You saw how the cowardly hound ran away."

"Quite so, Mr. Morse. Of course a man in your position must be subject to these things occasionally."

"Ah, you see that," he said briskly, and I knew he was relieved. "You are a man of the world, and you see that. Well, I am thankful for your promise of silence. I am the more annoyed, though, that Juanita should have been present at a scene which, though really burlesque, must have seemed to her one of violence."

I had my own opinion about the burlesque nature of the incident, but I made haste to reassure him.

"Of course," I said, "it must have been distressing for any lady, but it was the suddenness that upset her, and I'm sure Miss Morse's nerves are far too good for it to have any permanent effect."

"Yes," he answered, and in his voice there was a caress,

"I can explain it all to Juanita, and the memory of this evening will soon go from her."

Again I had my own private opinion, which I forbore to state. Personally, I had very little doubt but that Juanita would remember this evening as long as the darling lived! It would not be my fault if she didn't! But I saw that this was no moment to tell him that I loved her. Perhaps, if we had been granted five minutes more in the conservatory and I had said all I meant, and heard from her all I hoped, I should have spoken then. As it was I could not, though in my own mind I was certain she cared for me.

We were silent for a few moments, and then Morse seemed to recall himself from private thought.

"I had nearly forgotten!" he said. "You specially wanted to see me to-night, Sir Thomas, and you've very kindly waited in order to do so."

Then I remembered the errand upon which I had come, and pulled myself together mentally. I liked Morse. He was of tremendous importance to me, and yet at the same time it behooved me to be wary. Already I was certain that he was playing a game with me in the matter of Mark Antony Midwinter, whose name I kept rigidly to myself. I must play my cards carefully.

Please understand me, I don't for a moment mean that I felt he was my enemy, or inimical to me in any way. Far from it. I knew that he liked me and wouldn't do me a bad turn if he could help it. At the same time I was perfectly sure that if necessary he would use me like a pawn in a mysterious game that I couldn't fathom, and I didn't

mean to be used like a pawn if I could help it. My hope and ambition was to serve him, but I wanted a little reserve of power also, for reasons I need not indicate.

"Yes," I said, "I telephoned you."

"And you mentioned a certain word which rather puzzled me."

"I did. 'Towers' was the word."

"I believe we are going to meet at The Towers at Cerne in Norfolk," said Mr. Morse. "Sir Walter Stileman told me that you were to be of the shooting party in September."

At that I laughed frankly, really he was a little underestimating me. He grinned and understood in a second.

"Tell me, Sir Thomas, exactly what you *do* mean," he said.

"Well, you know I am a newspaper proprietor and editor."

"Of the best written and most alive journal in London!"

I bowed, and produced from an inside pocket Master Bill Rolston's astonishing piece of copy.

"An unknown journalist who was introduced to me today," I said, "brought a piece of news which would be of absorbing interest to the country if it were published and if it were true. Perahps you would like to read this."

I handed him the typewritten copy and prepared to watch his face as he read it, but he was too clever for that. He took it and perused it, walking up and down the room, and I began to realize some of the qualities which had made this man one of the powers of the world.

More especially so when he came and sat down again,

his face wreathed in smiles, though I could have sworn fury lurked in the depths of his black eyes.

"Well, now," he said, "this is interesting, very interesting indeed. I am going to be quite frank with you, Sir Thomas. There's an amount of truth in this manuscript that would cause me colossal worry if it were published at present. Another thing it would do would be to quite upset a financial operation of considerable magnitude. Personally, I should lose at the very least a couple of million sterling, though that wouldn't make any appreciable difference to my fortune, but a lot of other people would be ruined and for no possible benefit to any one in the world except yourself and the *Evening Special*."

"Thank you," I said, "that's just why I came. Of course nothing shall be published, though I'm quite in the dark as to the nature of the whole thing."

"I call that generous, generous beyond belief, Sir Thomas, for I know that it is the life of a newspaper to get hold of exclusive news. I would offer you a large sum not to publish this story did I not know that you would indignantly refuse it. I am a student of men, my young friend, if I may be allowed to call you so, and even if you were a poor man instead of being a rich one as ordinary wealth goes, I should never make such a proposition."

I glowed inwardly as he said it. It was a downright compliment, coming from him under the circumstances, at which any one would have been warmed to the heart. For here was a great man, a Napoleon of his day, one who, if he chose, could upset dynasties and plunge nations into

war. Yet, as I knew quite well, Gideon Mendoza Morse wasn't a member of the great financial groups who control and sway politics. In a sense he was that rare thing, a pastoral millionaire. He owned vast tracts of country populated by lowing steers for the food of the world. In the remote mountains of Brazil brown Indians toiled to wrest precious metals and jewels from the earth for his advantage. But from the feverish plotting of international finance I knew him to stand aloof.

"I very much appreciate your remarks," was what I told him, "and you may rest assured that nothing shall transpire."

"Thanks. But all the generosity mustn't be on your side. You shall have your scoop, Sir Thomas, if you will wait a little while."

"I am entirely at your service."

"Very well then," he said, and his manner grew extraordinarily cordial, "let's put a period to it! I hope that, from to-day, I and my daughter are going to see a great deal of you—a great deal more of you than hitherto. You know how we are"—he gave a little annoyed laugh—"run after in London; and what a success Juanita has had over here. What I hope to do is to form a little inner circle of friends, and you must be one of them—if you will?"

How my luck held! I thought. Here, offered freely and with open hands, was the only thing I wanted. I am glad to think that I found a moment in which to be sorry for Arthur and dear old Pat Moore.

"It's awfully good of you," I stammered.

He made a little impatient gesture with his hand.

"Please don't talk nonsense," he said. "And now about the towers on Richmond Hill. I have told you that I cannot explain fully until September. I will tell you, though, that your clever little journalist—what, by the way, did you say his name was?"

"Rolston."

"Of course—has ferreted out much that I wished to conceal, but he isn't entirely upon the right track. I *am,* Kirby, at the bottom of the whole thing, and I have spent goodness knows how much to keep that quiet."

He lit another cigarette, leant back in his chair and laughed like a boy.

"I've bribed, and bribed, and bribed, I've managed to put pressure, actually to put pressure upon the British Government. I've employed an untold number of agents, in short I've exercised the whole of my intellect, and the pressure of almost unlimited capital to keep my name out of it. And now, you tell me, some little journalist has found out one thing at least that I was determined to conceal until September next! The plans of men and mice gang oft agley, Kirby! This little man of yours must be a sort of genius. I hope there are no more people like him prowling about Richmond Hill."

I was quite certain that there was not another Bill Rolston anywhere, and I amused Morse immensely by detailing the circumstances of the little, red-haired man's

arrival in Fleet Street. I never realized till now how human and genial the great man could be, for he even expanded sufficiently to offer to toss me a thousand pounds to nothing for the services of Julia Dewsbury!

I saw my way with Juanita becoming smoother and smoother every moment.

It was growing late, nearly one o'clock, when Morse insisted on having some bisque soup brought in.

"I think we both want something really sustaining," he said. "Do you begin and I'll just run up and see my sister-in-law, Señora Balmaceda, and find out if Juanita is all right."

He left the room, and, happy that all had gone so well, I sipped the incomparable white essence, and gave myself up to dreams of the future.

I was to see her often. In September, at Sir Walter Stileman's, Morse was to take me into his fullest confidence. That could only mean one thing. Within a little less than three months he would give his consent to my marriage with his daughter. Another opportunity like this of to-night, and Juanita and I would be betrothed. It would be delightful to keep our secret until the shooting began. I would follow her through the events of the season, watch her mood, hear her extolled on every side, knowing all the time she was mine. A vision came to me of Cowes week, the gardens of the R. Y. Squadron, Juanita on board of my own yacht "Moonlight."

I think I must have fallen asleep when I started into

consciousness to find myself staring into the great broken mirror over the mantelpiece and to find that Mr. Morse had returned and was smiling down upon me.

"She's all right, thank heavens," he said, "and has been asleep for a long time. And now, as you seem sleepy too, I'll bid you good-night, with a thousand thanks for your consideration."

It was nearly two o'clock I noticed when I stepped out into the cool air of Piccadilly and walked the few yards to my flat. I must have been asleep for quite a long time, and dear old Morse had forborne to waken me.

I peculiarly remember my sense of well-being and happiness during that short walk. I was in a glow of satisfaction. Everything had turned out even better than I had expected. What did the scoop for the paper matter after all? Nothing, in comparison with the more or less intimate relations in which I now stood with Gideon Morse. I was to see Juanita constantly. She was almost mine already, and fortune had been marvelously on my side. Of course there would be obstacles, there was no doubt of that. I was no real match for her. But the obstacles in the future were as nothing to those that had been already surmounted. I began to smile with conceit at the diplomatic way in which I had dealt with the great financier; not for a single moment, as I put my key into the latch, did I dream that I had been played with the utmost skill, tied myself irrevocably to silence, and that horrible trouble and grim peril even now walked unseen by my side.

When I got into the smoking-room I found things just

as usual. I had hardly lit a last cigarette when the door opened and Preston entered.

"Good heavens!" I said, "I never told you to wait up for me, Preston. There was not the slightest need. You ought to have been in bed hours ago."

"So I was, Sir Thomas," he said looking at me in a surprised sort of way, and I noticed for the first time that he was wearing a gray flannel dressing-gown and slippers.

"What do you mean?"

"Until the telephone message came, Sir Thomas."

"What telephone message?"

"Why, yours, Sir Thomas."

"I never telephoned. When do you mean?"

"Not very long ago, Sir Thomas," he said, "I didn't take particular notice of the time, somewhere between one o'clock and now."

I was on the alert at once, though I could not have particularly said why.

"Are you quite sure that it was I who 'phoned?"

"But, yes," he answered, "it was your voice, Sir Thomas. You said you were speaking from the office."

"From the *Evening Special?* I've not been there since late afternoon. And when have I ever been there so late? There's never more than one person there all night long until six in the morning. It's not a morning paper as you know."

Preston seemed more than ever bewildered as I flung this at him.

"All I can say is, Sir Thomas," he said, "that I heard

your voice distinctly and you said you were at the office."

"What did I say exactly?"

"About the young gentleman, Sir Thomas, the young gentleman who has come to stay for a time. Your instructions were that he should be wakened and told to come to Fleet Street without the least delay. You also said a taxicab would be waiting for him, by the time he was dressed, to drive him down."

"And he went?"

"Certainly, Sir Thomas, he was in his clothes quicker than I ever see a gentleman dress before, had a glass of milk and a biscuit, and the cab was just coming as I went down with him and opened the front door."

I rushed out of the room, down the corridor and into that which had been placed at Rolston's disposal. It was as Preston said, the lad was gone. The bed was tumbled as he had left it, but a portmanteau full of clothes, some hair brushes and a tooth brush on the wash-stand remained. Clearly Rolston believed he was obeying orders.

Preston had followed me out of the smoking-room and stood at the door, a picture of uneasy wonder. Let me say at once that Preston had been with me for six years, and was under-butler at my father's house for I don't know how many more. He is the most faithful and devoted creature on earth and, what is more, as sharp as a needle. He, at any rate, had no hand in this business.

"There's something extraordinarily queer about this," I said. "I assure you that I have never been near the tele-

phone during the whole night. I dined with Lord Arthur in Soho and the rest of the evening I have been spending at the Ritz Hotel with Mr. Gideon Morse. You've been tricked, Preston."

"I'm extremely sorry, Sir Thomas," he was beginning when I cut him short.

"It's not in the least your fault, but are you certain the voice was mine?"

He frowned with the effort at recollection.

"Well, Sir Thomas," he said, "if you hadn't told me what you have, I believe I could almost have sworn to it. Of course, voices are altered on the telephone, to some extent, but it's extraordinary how they do, in the main, keep their individual character."

He spoke the truth. I, who was using the telephone all day, entirely agreed with him.

"Well, Preston, it was a skillful imitation and not my voice at all."

"If you will excuse me, Sir Thomas," he replied, "your voice is a very distinctive one. It's not very easily mistaken by any one who has heard your voice once or twice."

"That only makes the thing the more mysterious."

"The more easy, I should say, Sir Thomas. It must be far less difficult to imitate an outstanding voice with marked peculiarities than an ordinary one."

He was right there, it hadn't occurred to me before.

"But who in the office would dare to imitate my voice?"

"That, of course, I could not say, Sir Thomas, but we've only the word of the unknown person who rang me up that

he was speaking from the office. For all we know he might have been in the next flat."

That again was a point and I noted it.

"I'm not going to waste any time," I said. "I'll go down to the office at once and see if I can find out anything."

He helped me on with my coat and within five minutes of my entering I was again in Piccadilly.

Already the long ribbon of road was beginning to be faintly tinged with gray. The dawn was not yet, but night was flitting away before his coming. Save for an occasional policeman and the rumble of heavy carts piled with sweet-smelling vegetables and flowers for Covent Garden, the great street was empty. I passed the Ritz Hotel with a tender thought of one who lay sleeping there, and hurried eastwards. I had nearly got to the Circus when a taxi swung out of the Haymarket and I hailed the man. He was tired and sleepy, had been waiting for hours at some club or other, but I persuaded him, with much gold, to take me, and we buzzed away toward the street of ink.

Here was activity enough. The later editions of the morning papers were being vomited out of holes in the earth by hundreds of thousands. Windows were lighted up everywhere as I turned down a side street leading to the river and came to my own offices.

I unlocked the door with my pass key and almost immediately I was confronted by Johns, the night-watchman, who flashed his torch in my face and inquired my business. I was pleased to see the man alert and at his post and asked who was in the building.

"Only Mr. Benson, Sir Thomas; it's his week for night duty."

I went up and very considerably surprised, not to say alarmed, young Mr. Benson, who had the photograph of a lady propped up on a desk before him and was obviously inditing an amorous epistle.

I put him through the most searching possible cross-examination, until I was quite sure that he had never telephoned to my flat. I knew him for a truthful, conscientious fellow, without a glimpse of humor or the slightest histrionic talent. Johns, called from below, was equally emphatic. Certainly no taxi had arrived here during the last three hours, nor had William Rolston come near the office.

I returned to Piccadilly, utterly baffled and without a single ray of light in my mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

On the morning of the fourteenth of September I met Captain Pat Moore and Lord Arthur Winstanley at Liverpool Street station. We were all three of us asked to Cerne as guests of that fine old sportsman, Sir Walter Stileman. A special carriage was reserved for us and our servants filled it with luncheon baskets and gun cases.

It was almost exactly three months since my eventful night at the Ritz with Gideon Morse, and the disappearance of little William Rolston.

What had passed since that time I can set out fully in a very few words. First of all the position in which I stood with regard to Juanita. It was somewhat extraordinary, satisfactory, had yet unsatisfactory, utterly tantalizing. Morse had kept his promise. I *had* seen a great deal of his daughter. At Henley, at Cowes—on board the millionaire's wonderful yacht or on my own, in the sacred gardens of the R. Y. S., where we met and met again. Yet these meetings were always in public. Juanita was surrounded by men wherever she went. She was the reigning beauty of her year. Her minutest doings were chronicled in the Society papers with a wealth of detail that was astounding. I used to read the stuff, including that of my own Miss Easey, with a sort of impotent rage. Some of it was true, a lot of it was lies and surmise, but to me it

was all distasteful. Juanita lived in the full glare of the public eye, and a royal princess could hardly have been more unapproachable. Of course I used stratagems innumerable, and more than once she went half-way to meet me, but the long desired *tête-à-tête* never came to pass. It was not only because of the troop of admirers that crowded round her, of which I was only one, but there was an extraordinary adroitness, "a hidden hand" at work somewhere, to keep us apart. I was quite certain of this, yet I could not prove it, though even if I had it would have been of little use. Old Señora Balmaceda, who overwhelmed me with kindness and attention, was simply wonderful in her watch over Juanita.

As for Gideon Morse, he would talk to me by the hour—and his talk was well worth listening to—but somehow or other he was always in the way when I wanted to be alone with his daughter. Of course I sometimes thought I was exaggerating, and that I was so hard hit that I saw things in a jaundiced or prejudiced light. Yet certainly Juanita was often alone for a short time with other men than I, notably with the young and good-looking Duke of Perth, whom I hated as cordially as I knew how.

Then, in August, I had a nasty knock. The Morses went off to Scotland for the grouse shooting as guests of the Duke, and I wasn't asked, or ever in the way of being asked if it comes to that, to join the "small and select house-party" that the papers were so full of. I had to content myself with pictures on the front page of the Illustrated Weeklies depicting Juanita in a tweed skirt and

a tam o' shanter, side by side with Perth, wearing a fatuous smile and a gun. I had one crumb of consolation only and that was, when saying good-by to Juanita, I felt something small and hard in the palm of her hand. It was a little tightly folded piece of paper and on it was one word, "Cerne."

That of course helped a great deal. It was obvious what she meant. When we met at Sir Walter Stileman's, then at last my opportunity would come.

And now about the little journalist and his extraordinary disappearance. I made every possible inquiry, engaging the most skilled agents and sparing no money in the quest, but I found out nothing—absolutely nothing. The red-headed lad with the prominent ears had vanished into thin air, had flashed into my life for a moment and then gone out of it with the completeness of an extinguished candle. He had been, he was no more. Poor Miss Dewsbury, on whom the disappearance had a marked effect, discussed the matter with me a dozen times. We broached theory after theory only to reject them, and at last we ceased to talk about the matter at all. I remember her words on the last time we talked of it. They were prophetic, though I did not know it then.

"All I can say is, Sir Thomas, that voices, not my own, whisper constantly in my ear that the shadow of the three giant towers upon Richmond Hill lies across your path."

Poor thing, she was almost hysterical in those times, and I paid little heed to her words. As for the scoop, no other paper had even hinted at Rolston's revelation. I

had faithfully kept my word to Morse, not forgetting that he had promised to explain everything—in September.

As the train swung out of Liverpool Street and Pat and Arthur were ragging each other as to who should have the *Times* first, I experienced a sense of mental relief. Only a few hours now and the great question of my life would be settled, once and for all. No more doubts, no more uncertainties.

During the last three months, Arthur and Pat had left me very much to myself. They had behaved with the most perfect tact and kindness, Arthur, as I have said, having obtained for me the invitation to Cerne. Now, after we had traveled for a couple of hours and the luncheon baskets had been opened, old Pat lit a cigar and looked across at me. His big, brown face was grave, and he played with his mustache as if in some embarrassment.

He and Arthur glanced at each other, and I understood what was in their minds.

"Look here, you fellows," I said, "about the sacred Brotherhood—what is it in Spanish?"

"Santa Hermandad," said Arthur.

"Well, you've kept your oath splendidly. I cannot thank you enough. I have had the running all to myself—as far as you two are concerned, for twelve weeks."

"Yes, twelve weeks," Pat replied, with a sigh. "We've kept out of the way, old fellow, and I tell you it's been hard!"

Arthur nodded in corroboration, and somehow or other I felt myself a cur. Since boyhood we three had been like

brothers, and it was a hard fate indeed that led us to center all our hopes upon something that could belong to one alone.

Despite what must have been their burning eagerness to know how things stood, both of them were far too delicate-minded and well-bred to ask a question. I knew it was up to me to satisfy them.

"Without going into details," I said, "I'll tell you just how it is, how I think it is, for I may be quite wrong, and presuming upon what doesn't exist."

I thought for a moment, and chose my words carefully. It was extremely difficult to say what I had to say.

"It comes to about this," I got out at last. "I've every reason to believe that she likes me. There's nothing decisive, but I've been given some hope. I very nearly put it to the test three months ago, but was interrupted and never had the chance again. At Cerne I'm going to try, finally. By hook or crook, in forty-eight hours, I'll have some news for you. And if I get the sack, then let the next man go in and win if he can, and I'll join the third in doing everything that lies in my power to help him."

"I am next," said Pat Moore, "not that I've the deuce of a chance. But I think you've spoken like a damn good sort, Tom, and we thank you. Arthur and I will do our best to keep every one else off the grass while you go in and try your luck. Faith! I'll make love to the duenna with the white hair meself and keep her out of the way, and Arthur here will consult with Morse upon the expediency of investing his large capital, which he hasn't got, in a Brazil-

nut farm. Anyhow, Perth, who has been the safety bet with all the tipsters, won't be there. He's such a rotten shot that Sir Walter wouldn't dream of asking him. The bag has got to be kept up. For three years now, only Sandringham has beat it and a duffer at a drive would send the average down appallingly."

"What about me?" I asked, with a sinking of the heart.

"God forgive me," said Arthur, "I've lied about you to Sir Walter like the secretary of a building society to a maiden lady with two thousand pounds. He was astonished that he had never heard of your shooting—of course, he knows all the shots of the day, and I had to tell him a fairy story about your late lamented father who was a Puritan and would never let his son join country house-parties because they played cards after dinner."

I smiled, on the wrong side of my mouth. My dear old governor had been anything but a Puritan: I feared the scandal which would inevitably ensue when I went out for the first big drive.

"That's all right, Tom," said Arthur, "you'll simply have to sprain your ankle, or I'll give you a good hack in the shin privately if you like. Sir Walter has only to send a wire to get a first-class gun down. There are at least a dozen men I know who would almost commit parricide for the chance."

After that, by general consent, the subject of the league was dropped. We all knew where we were, and for the rest of the journey we talked of ordinary things.

It was a bright afternoon in early autumn when we

stopped at the little local station and got into a waiting motor-car, while our servants collected our things and followed in the baggage lorry. For myself, I felt in the highest spirits as we buzzed along the three miles to Cerne Hall. There was a pleasant nip in the air; the vast landscape was yellow gold, as acre after acre of stubble stretched towards the horizon. Gray church towers embowered in trees broke the vast monotony, and I surrendered myself to a happy dream of Juanita, while Arthur and Pat talked shooting and marked covies that rose on either side as we whirred by.

When we arrived at Cerne Hall it was not yet tea-time, and everybody was out. The butler showed us to our rooms, all close together in the south wing of the fine old house, and I smoked a cigarette while Preston was unpacking.

"Everybody arrived yet, Preston?" I asked.

"Not yet, Sir Thomas, so I understand. I and Captain Moore's man and his lordship's was havin' a cherry brandy in the housekeeper's room just now, and the bulk of the house-party will be arriving by the later train, between tea and dinner, Sir Thomas."

"And Mr. Morse?"

"Only just before dinner, Sir Thomas; he always travels in a special train."

I saw by Preston's face that he considered this a snobbish and ostentatious thing to do, and, in the case of an ordinary multi-millionaire, I should certainly have agreed with him. But I recalled facts that had come to my notice

about the famous Brazilian, and I wondered. There was the astounding scene at the Ritz, for instance, and more than that. I had not been following up Juanita for three months, in town, at Henley, and at Cowes, without noticing that Mr. Gideon Morse seemed to have an unobtrusive but quite singular entourage.

More than once, for example, I had caught sight of a certain great hulking man in tweeds, a professional Irish-American bruiser, if ever there was one.

Tea was in the hall of the great house. I was introduced to Sir Walter, a delightful man, with a hooked nose, a tiny mustache, the remains of gray hair, and a charming smile. Lady Stileman also made me most welcome. Her hair was gray, but her figure was slight and upright as a girl's, and many girls in the County must have envied her dainty prettiness, and the charm of her lazy, musical voice.

Circumstances paired me off with a vivacious young lady whose face I seemed to know, whose surname I could not catch, but whom every one called "Poppy."

"I say," she said, after her third cup of tea and fourth egg sandwich, "you're the *Evening Special,* aren't you?"

I admitted it.

"Well," she said, "I do think you might give me a show now and then. Considering the press I generally get, I've never been quite able to understand why the *Special* leaves me out of it."

I thought she must be an actress—and yet she hadn't quite that manner. At any rate I said:

"I'm awfully sorry, but you see I'm only editor, and I've nothing really to do with the dramatic criticism. However, please say the word, and I'll ginger up my man at once."

"Dramatic criticism!" she said, her eyes wide with surprise. "Sir Thomas, can it really be that you don't know who I am?"

It was a little embarrassing.

"Do you know, I know your face awfully well," I said, "though I'm quite sure we've never met before or I should have remembered, and when Lady Stileman introduced us just now all I caught was Poppy."

She sighed—I should put her between nineteen and twenty in age—"Well, for a London editor, you *are* a fossil, though you don't look more than about six-and-twenty. Why, Poppy Boynton!"

Then, in a flash, I knew. This was the Hon. Poppy Boynton, Lord Portesham's daughter, the flying girl, the leading lady aviator, who had looped the loop over Mont Blanc and done all sorts of mad, extraordinary things.

"*Of course,* I know you, Miss Boynton! Only, I never expected to meet you here. What a chance for an editor! Do tell me all your adventures."

"Will you give me a column interview on the front page if I do?"

"Of course I will. I'll write it myself."

"And a large photograph?"

"Half the back page if you like."

"You're a dear," she said in a business-like voice. "On

second thoughts, I'll write the interview myself and give it you before we leave here. And, meanwhile, I'll tell you an extraordinary flight of mine only yesterday."

I was in for it and there was no way out. Still, she was extremely pretty and a celebrity in her way, so I settled myself to listen.

"What did you do yesterday morning?" I asked. "Did you loop the loop over Saint Paul's or something?"

"Loop the loop!" she replied, with great contempt. "That's an infantile stunt of the dark ages. No, I went for my usual morning fly before breakfast and saw a marvel, and got cursed by a djinn out of the Arabian Nights."

This sounded fairly promising for a start, but as she went on I jerked like a fish in a basket.

"You know the great wireless towers on Richmond Hill?"

"Of course. The highest erection in the world, isn't it, more than twice the height of the Eiffel Tower? You can see the things from all parts of London."

"On a clear day," she nodded, "the rest of the time the top is quite hidden by clouds. Now it struck me I'd go and have a look at them close to. Our place, Norman Court, is only about fifteen miles farther up the Thames. I started off in my little gnat-machine and rose to about fifteen hundred feet at once, when I got into a bank of fleecy wet cloud, fortunately not more than a hundred yards or so thick. It was keeping all the sun from London about seven-thirty yesterday morning. When I came out above, of course I wasn't sure of my direction, but as I turned the machine a point or so I saw, standing up straight

out of the cloud at not more than six miles away, the tops of the towers. I headed straight for them."

She lit a cigarette and I noticed her face changed a little. There was an introspective look in the eyes, a look of memory.

"As I drew near, Sir Thomas, I saw what I think is the most marvelous sight I have *ever* seen. You people who crawl about on earth never do see what *we* see. I have flown over Mont Blanc and seen the dawn upon the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa from that height, and I thought that was the most heavenly thing ever seen by mortal eye. But yesterday morning I beat that impression—yes!—right on the outskirts of London and only a few hours ago! Down from below nobody can really see much of the towers. You haven't seen much, for instance, have you?"

"Only that they're now all linked together at the top by the most intricate series of girders, on the suspension principle, I suppose. There are a lot of sheds and things on this artificial space, or at least it looks like it."

"Sheds and things! Sir Thomas, I thought I saw the New Jerusalem floating on the clouds! The morning sun poured down upon a vast, hanging space of which you can have no conception, and rising up on every side from snowy-white ramparts were towers and cupolas with gilded roofs which blazed like gold. There were fantastic halls pierced with Oriental windows, walls which glowed like jacinth and amethyst, and parapets of pearl.

"It was a city, a City in the Clouds, a place of enchantment floating high, high up above the smoke and the din

of London—serene, majestic, and utterly lovely. I tell you"—here her voice dropped—"the vision caught at my heart, and a great lump came into my throat. I'm pretty hard-bitten, too! As I went past one side of the immense triangle—which must occupy several acres—on which the city is built, I saw an inner courtyard with what seemed like green lawns. I could swear there were trees planted there and that a great fountain was playing like a stream of liquid diamonds.

"I was so startled, and almost frightened, that I ripped away for several miles till, descending a little through the cloud-bank, I found I was right over Tower Bridge.

"But I swore I'd see that majestic city again, and I spiraled up and turned.

"There it was, many miles away now, a mere speck upon the billowing snow of the cloud-bank, and as I raced towards it once more it grew and grew into all its former loveliness. I adjusted my engines and went as slow as I possibly could—perhaps you know that our modern aeroplanes, with the new helicopter central screw, can glide at not much more than fifteen miles an hour, for a short distance that is. Well, that's what I did, and once more the place burst upon me in all its wonder. It's the marvel of marvels, Sir Thomas; I haven't got words even to hint at it. I could see details more clearly now, and I floated by among the ramparts on one side, not a pistol shot away. And then, upon the top of a little flat tower there appeared the most extraordinary figure.

"It was a gigantic yellow-faced man in a long robe and

wide sleeves, and he threw his hands above his head and cursed me. Of course the noise of the engine drowned all he said, but his face was simply fiendish. I just caught one flash of it, and I never want to see anything like it again."

I sat spellbound in my chair while she told me this and again the sense that I was being borne along, whither I knew not, by some irresistible current of fate, possessed me to the exclusion of all else.

"Why, you look quite tired and gray, Sir Thomas," said Miss Boynton. "I do hope I haven't bored you."

"Bored me! I was away up in the air with you, looking upon that enchanted city. But why, what do you make of it, have you told any one?"

"Only father and my sister, who said that it must have been an illusion of the mist, a refraction of the air at high altitudes that transformed the wireless instrument sheds to fairyland."

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"As if I didn't know all about that!" she said. "Why, it wasn't much more than two thousand feet up—a mere hop."

I had to think very rapidly at this juncture. The news took one's breath away. To begin with, one thing seemed perfectly clear. Gideon Morse had purposely told me as little as he possibly could. Yet, upon reflection, I found that he had told me no lies. He had admitted that he was at the bottom of this colossal enterprise—was it some Earl's Court of the air, the last word in amusement catering? It

might well be so, though somehow or other the thought annoyed me. Moreover, the capital outlay must have been so vast that such a scheme could never pay interest upon it. Then I recollected that in a few hours more I should have my promised talk with Morse and he would explain everything as he had promised. There was still a chance of a big scoop for the *Evening Special.*

"Look here, Miss Boynton," I said, "if you keep what you have seen a secret for the next two days, and then let me publish an account of it, my paper would gladly pay two hundred and fifty pounds for the story."

Her eyes opened wide, like those of a child who has been promised a very big box of chocolates indeed.

"Can do," she said, holding out a pretty little hand which flying had in no way roughened or distorted. I took it, and so the bargain was made.

Soon afterwards more guests began to arrive, and the great hall was full of laughing, chattering figures, among whom were several people that I knew. However, I was in no mood for society or small talk and I retired to my own room and sat dreaming before a comfortable fire until Preston came in and told me it was time to dress.

I was ashamed to ask him if the Morses had arrived, but I went downstairs into a large yellow drawing-room half full of people, and looked round eagerly.

Lady Stileman was standing by one of the fireplaces talking to Miss Boynton, and I went up to them. Apparently it was a wonderful year for "birds," as partridges, and partridges alone, are called in Norfolk. They had

hatched out much later than usual, hence the waiting until the middle of September, but covies were abnormally large and the young birds already strong upon the wing. Fortunately Lady Stileman did all the talking; I smiled, looked oracular and said "Quite so" at intervals. My eye was on the drawing-room door which led out into the hall. Once, twice, it opened, but only to admit strangers to me. The third time, when I made sure I should see her for whom I sought, no one came in but a footman in the dark green livery of the house. He carried a salver, and on it was the orange-colored envelope of a telegram.

With a word of excuse Lady Stileman opened it. She nodded to the man to go and then turned to me and Poppy Boynton.

"Such a disappointment," she said. "Mr. Morse and his wonderfully pretty daughter were to have been here, as I think you know. Now he wires to say that business of the utmost importance prevents either him or his daughter coming. Fortunately," the good lady concluded, "he doesn't shoot, so that won't throw the guns out. Walter would be furious if that happened."

Arthur and Pat Moore came into the room at that moment, and Arthur told me, an hour or so afterwards, that I looked as if I had seen a ghost, and that my face was white as paper.

CHAPTER SIX

I MUST now, in the progress of the story, give a brief account of what I may call "The week of rumor," which immediately preceded my disappearance and plunge into the unknown.

I spent a miserable and agitated evening at Cerne Hall, and went early to my room. Arthur and Pat joined me there an hour later and for some time we talked over what the telegram from Morse might mean, until they retired to their own rooms and I was left alone.

I did not sleep a wink—indeed, I made no effort to go to bed, though I took off my clothes and wrapped myself in a dressing-gown. The suspense was almost unbearable, and, failing further news, I determined, at any cost to the shooting plans of my host, to get myself recalled to London by telegram. I felt sure that the whole of my life's happiness was at stake.

The next morning at nine o'clock, just as I was preparing to go down to breakfast, a long wire was brought to me. It was in our own office cipher, which I was trained to read without the key, and it was signed by Julia Dewsbury. The gist of the message was that there were strange rumors all over Fleet Street about the great towers at Richmond. An enormous sensation was gathering like a thunder

cloud in the world of news and would shortly burst. Would I come to London at the earliest possible moment?

How I got out of Cerne Hall I hardly remember, but I did, to the blank astonishment of my host; drove to the nearest station, caught a train which got me to Norwich in half an hour and engaged the swiftest car in the city to run me up to London at top speed. Just after lunch I burst into the office of the *Evening Special.*

Williams and Miss Dewsbury were expecting me.

"It's big stuff," said the acting editor excitedly, "and we ought to be in it first, considering that we've more definite information than I expect any other paper possesses as yet, though it won't be the case for very long."

I sat down with hardly a word, and nodded to Miss Dewsbury. Her training was wonderful. She had everything ready in order to acquaint me with the facts in the shortest possible space of time.

She spoke into the telephone and Miss Easey—"Vera" of our "Society Gossip"—came in.

"I have found out, Sir Thomas," she said, "that Mr. Gideon Morse has canceled all social engagements whatever for himself and his daughter. Miss Dewsbury tells me that it's not necessary now to say what these were. I will, however, tell you that they extended until the New Year and were of the utmost social importance."

"Canceled, Miss Easey?"

"Definitely and finally *canceled,* both by letter to the various hosts and hostesses concerned, and by an intimation which is already sent to all the London dailies, for

publication to-morrow. The notice came up to my room this morning from our own advertising office, for inclusion in 'Society Notes'—as you know such intimations are printed as news and paid for at a guinea a line."

"Any reason given, Miss Easey?"

"None whatever in the notices, which are brief almost to curtness. However, I have been able to see one of the private letters which has been received by my friends, Lord and Lady William Gatehouse, of Banks. It is courteously worded, and explains that Mr. and Miss Morse are definitely retiring from social life. It's signed by his secretary."

The invaluable Julia nodded to Miss Easey. She pursed up her prim old mouth, wished me good-morning and rustled away.

"That's *that!*" said Julia, "now about the towers."

"Yes, about the towers," I said, and my voice was very hoarse.

"As my poor friend, Mr. Rolston, discovered," she said bravely, "these monstrous blots upon London are certainly not for the purposes of wireless telegraphy. There are half the journalists in London at Richmond at the present moment, including two of our own reporters, and it is said that on the immense platforms between the towers, a series of extraordinary and luxurious buildings has been erected. It is widely believed that Gideon Morse is out of his mind, and has retired to a sort of unassailable, luxurious hermitage in the sky."

There was a knock at the door and a sub-editor came

in with a long white strip just torn from the tape machine. I took it and read that the "Central News Agencies" announces "crowds at base of towers surrounded by a thirty-foot wall. Callers at principal gate are politely received by Boss Mulligan, formerly well-known boxer, United States, now in the service of Gideon M. Morse. Inquirers told that no statement can be issued for publication. Later. Rumor in neighborhood says that towers are entirely staffed by special Chinese servants, large company of which arrived at Liverpool on Thursday last. Growing certainty that towers are private enterprise of one man, Morse, the Brazilian multi-millionaire."

A telephone bell on my table rang. I took it up.

"Is that Sir Thomas? Charles Danvers speaking"—it was the voice of our dapper young Parliamentary correspondent, the nephew of a prominent under-secretary, and as smart as they make them.

"Yes, where are you?"

"House of Commons. Mr. Bloxhame, Member for Budmouth, is asking a question in the House this afternoon about the Richmond Tower sensation. The Secretary to the Board of Trade will reply. There's great interest in the lobby. Special edition clearly indicated. Question will come on about four."

I sent every one away and thought for a quarter of an hour. Of course all this absolved me of my promise to Morse. He had played with me, fooled me absolutely and I had been like a babe in his astute hands. Well,

there was no time to think of my own private grievances. My immediate duty was to make as good a show that afternoon and the next day as any other paper. My hope was to beat all my rivals out of the field.

After all, there were nothing but rumors and surmise up to the present. The news situation might change in a couple of hours, but at the present moment I felt certain that I knew more about the affair than any other man in Fleet Street. I set my teeth and resolved to let old Morse have it in the neck.

Within an hour or so we had an "Extra Edition" on the streets, and during that hour I drew on my own private knowledge and dictated to Miss Dewsbury, and a couple of other stenographers. Poppy Boynton's experience was a godsend. I remembered her own vivid words of the night before, and I printed them in the form of an interview which must have satisfied even that delightful girl's hunger for advertisement. Incidentally, I sent a man from the Corps of Commissionaires down to Cerne in a fast motor-car, with notes for two hundred and fifty in an envelope, and instructions to stop in Regent Street on his way and buy the finest box of chocolates that London could produce—I remember the bill came in a few days afterwards, and if you'll believe me, it was for seventeen pounds ten!

At four o'clock, while the question was being asked in the House of Commons, and all the other evening papers were waiting the result for their special editions, my "Extra

Special" was rushing all over London—the "Extra Special" containing the "First Authentic Description of the City in the Clouds."

"You really are wonderful, Sir Thomas," said Miss Dewsbury, removing her tortoise-shell spectacles and touching her eyes with a somewhat dingy handkerchief, "but where, oh, where is William Rolston?"

"My dear girl," I replied, "from what I've seen of William Rolston, I'm quite certain that he's alive and kicking. Not only that, but we shall hear from him again very shortly."

"You really think so, Sir Thomas?"—the eyes, hitherto concealed by the spectacles, were really rather fascinating eyes after all.

"I don't *think* so, I know it. Look here, Miss Dewsbury"—for some reason I couldn't resist the temptation of a confidence—"this thing, this stunt hits me privately a great deal harder than you can have any idea of. You said that the shadow of the towers was across my path, and you were more right than you knew. Enough said. I think we've whacked Fleet Street this afternoon. Well and good. There's a lot behind this momentary sensation, which I shall never leave go of until it's straightened out. This is between you and me, not for office consumption, but," I put my hand upon her thin arm, "if I can help in any way, you shall have your Bill Rolston."

She turned her head away and walked to the window. Then she said an astonishing thing.

"If only I could help you to your Juanita!"

"WHAT!" I shouted, "what on earth—"

A page came in with a telegram.

"Addressed to you, Sir Thomas," he said, "marked personal."

I tore it open, it was from Pat Moore.

"Extraordinary youth followed us out shooting, and came up at lunch asking for you. Boy of about sixteen. Mysterious cove with the assurance of Mephistopheles. Some question of fifty pounds was to get from you on delivering letter. Gave him your address and he departed for London."

I couldn't make head or tail of Pat's wire, and I put it down on the table for future consideration, when Williams hurried in with a pad of paper.

"Danvers just 'phoned through," he said, "and I've sent the message downstairs for the stop press."

I began to read.

"Bloxhame interrogated Secretary to the Board of Trade, who replied it was perfectly true that the towers were built to the order of Gideon Morse and were his property. Morse has entered into an agreement with the Government engaging not to use the towers for wireless telegraphy or for any other purpose than a strictly private one, which appears to be that he intends to live on the platforms on the top. At his death the whole property will pass into possession of the Government, to be used for wireless purposes, or for the principal aeroplane station between England and the Continent. Aeroplanes, when the existing buildings are

removed, will be able to alight from the platforms in numbers. Expenditure from first to last, Board of Trade estimates at seven millions. Feeling of House at such a magnificent gift to the Nation, which is bound to fall in within twenty years or so, friendly and satisfactory. In answer to a question from Commander Crosman, M.P. for Rodwell, President Board of Aerial Control announces that strict orders have been issued that aeroplanes are not to circle round the towers or in any way annoy present proprietor. The House is greatly amused and interested at this romantic news."

Williams departed to issue another "Extra Special," and I was once more left alone. Obviously the secret was out, it was startling enough in all conscience, and, as I thought, merely the whim of a madman. And yet there were aspects of it which were inexplicable. There could be no doubt whatever that Gideon Morse had flouted English society, which had treated him with extreme kindness, in a way that it would never forget. That surely was not the action of a sane man. If he had wanted to build for himself a lordly "pleasure house" to which he might retire upon occasions, a sane man would have arranged things very differently. Certainly, and this was not without some bitter satisfaction to me, he had ruined his daughter's chances of a brilliant marriage—for a long time at any rate. I saw that secrecy had been necessary, though it had been carried to an extreme degree; but why had he fooled me under the guise of friendship? Surely he could have trusted my word.

I was furious as I thought of the way I had been done. I was furious also, and worse than furious, alarmed, when I thought of Juanita. Had she been in the plot the whole time? Did she like being spirited away from all that could make a young girl's life bright and happy? What *was* at the bottom of it all?

The only thing to do was to try and keep ahead, or level, with my rival contemporaries in the matter of news, and privately to wait on events, and think the matter out definitely. For the next few days, weeks perhaps, some of the acutest brains in England would be puzzled over this problem, and if there was really anything more in it than the freak of a colossal egotist, who thus, with a superb gesture, signified his scorn of the world, then some light might come.

Suddenly I felt ill, and collapsed. I gave a few instructions, left the office and went home to Piccadilly, and to bed.

It was about eight o'clock when Preston woke me. I had had a bath and changed, and was wondering exactly what I should do for the rest of the evening, when Preston came in and said that there was a boy who wished to see me. He would neither give his name nor his business, but seemed respectable.

I remembered Pat's mysterious telegram, which till now I had quite forgotten, and with a certain quickening of the pulses I ordered the boy to be shown up.

He came into the room with a scrape and a bow, a nice-looking lad of sixteen, decently dressed in black.

"Who are you and what do you want?" I said.

He seemed a little nervous and his eyes were bright.

"Are you Sir Thomas Kirby?"

"Yes, what is it? By the way, haven't you been all the way to Norfolk to find me?"

"Yes, sir, it's my day off, but unfortunately I found you had left, sir, so I came on here as fast as I could. A gentleman at Cerne Hall gave me your address."

"And how did you know I was at Cerne Hall?"

"It's on the envelope, sir."

"The envelope?"

"Yes, sir, the one I was to deliver to you personally, and on no account to let it get into the hands of any one else, even one of your servants, sir, and"—he breathed a little fast—"and the lady said that you would certainly give me fifty pounds, sir, if I did exactly as she ordered, and never breathed a word to a single soul."

In an instant I understood. The blood grew hot and raced into my veins as I held out my hand, trembling with impatience, while the youth performed a somewhat complicated operation of half undressing, eventually producing a brown paper packet intricately tied with string, from some inner recesses of his wardrobe.

"Who are you?" I asked while he was unbuttoning.

"James Smith, sir, one of the pages at the Ritz Hotel."

I tore off the wrappers imposed upon the letter by this cautious youth. There was a letter addressed to me in a fine Italian hand which I knew from having seen it in one word only—"Cerne."

Fortunately, I had plenty of money in the flat and there was no need to give the excellent James Smith a check.

He gasped with joy as he tucked away the crackling bits of paper.

"And remember, not ever a word to any one, Smith."

"On my honor, sir," he said, saluting.

"And what will you do with it, Smith?"

"Please, sir, I hope to pelmanize myself into an hotel manager," he said, and I let him go at that. I only hope that he will succeed.

I opened the letter. It ran as follows:

"Farewell. I don't suppose we shall ever meet again. I am forced to retire from the world—from love—from you.

"I cannot explain, but fear walks with me night and day. Oh, my love! if you could only save me, you would, I know, but it is impossible and so farewell. Were I not sure that we shall not see each other more I could not write as I have done and signed myself here,

"Your

"JUANITA."

I put the letter carefully into the breast-pocket of my coat, and then, for the first time in my life, I fainted dead away.

Preston found me a few minutes later, got me right somehow, ascertained that I had not eaten for many hours, scolded me like a father, and poured turtle soup into me

till I was alive again, alive and changed from the man I had been a few hours ago.

. . . . . .

The next day I satisfied myself that all was going well in the office, and simply roamed about London. Already I think the dim purpose which afterwards came to such extraordinary fruit was being born in my mind. I wanted to be alone, taken quite out of my usual surroundings, and I achieved this with considerable success. I rode in tube trains and heard every one discussing Gideon Morse, and what was already known as the "City in the Clouds." The papers announced that thousands of people were encamped in Richmond Park gazing upwards, and seeing nothing because of a cloud veil that hung around the top of the towers. It seemed the proprietors of telescopes on tripods were doing a roaring trade at threepence a look, but the gate in the grim, prison-like walls surrounding the grounds at the foot of the tower, was never once opened all day long.

I began to realize that probably nothing new, nothing reliable that is, would transpire at present. The sensation would go its usual way. There would be songs and allusions in all the revues to-night. Punch would have a cartoon, suggesting the City in the Clouds as a place of banishment for its particular bugbear of the moment. Gossip papers would be full of beautiful, untrue stories of a romantic nature about the girl I loved, her name would be the subject of a million jokes by a million vulgar people. Then, little by little, the excitement would die away.

All this, as a trained journalist I foresaw easily enough, but knowing what I knew—what probably I alone of all the teeming millions in London knew—I was forming a resolve, which hourly grew stronger, that I would never rest until I knew the worst.

I found myself in Kensington. There was a motor-omnibus starting for Whitechapel Road. I climbed on the top.

"I sye," piped a little ragamuffin office boy to his friend, "why does Jewanniter live in the clouds, Willum?"

"Arsk me another."

" 'Cos she's a celebrated 'airess—see?"

"What I say," said a meager-looking man with a bristling mustache which unsuccessfully concealed his slack and feeble mouth, "is simply this. If Mr. Morse chooses to live in a certain way of life and 'as the money to carry it out, why not let him alone? Freedom for every individual is a 'progative of English life, and I expect Morse is fair furious with what they're saying about him, for I have it on the best authority that a copy of every edition of the *Evening Special* goes up to him in the tower lifts as soon as it is issued."

Words, words, words! everywhere, silly, irresponsible chatter which I heeded as little as a thrush heeds a shower of rain.

Steadily, swiftly, certainly, my purpose grew.

I got down in the Whitechapel Road, that wide and unlovely thoroughfare, and, feeling hungry, went into a dingy little restaurant partitioned off in boxes. The tablecloth

was of stained oil skin, the guests the seediest type of minor clerks, but I do remember that for ninepence I had a little beefsteak and kidney pudding to myself which was as good as anything I have ever eaten. As I went out I saw my neighbor of the omnibus who had spoken so eloquently of freedom, walking by with a little black bag, as in an aimless way I hailed a taxicab from the rank opposite a London hospital and told the man to drive slowly westwards.

He did so, and when we came to the Embankment a gleam of afternoon sunshine began to enlighten what had been a leaden day. Thinking a brisk walk from Black Friars to Westminster would help my thoughts, I dismissed the cab and started.

It was with an odd little thrill and flutter of the heart that far away westwards, to the left of the Houses of Parliament, I saw three ghostly lines, no thicker than lamp posts, it seemed, springing upwards from nothingness. At Cleopatra's Needle, I felt the want of a cigarette and stopped to light one.

At the moment there were few people on the pavement, though the unceasing traffic in the road roared by as usual. I lit the cigarette, put my case back in my pocket, and was about to continue my stroll when I heard some one padding up behind me with obvious purpose.

I half turned, and there again I saw the man with the weak mouth and the big mustache.

It flashed upon me, for the first time, that I was being

followed, had been followed probably during the whole of my wanderings.

As I said, there was nobody immediately about, so I turned to rabbit-face and challenged him.

"You're following me, my man, why? Out with it or I'll give you in charge."

"Yer can't," he said. "This is a free country, freedom is my 'progative as well as yerself, Sir Thomas Kirby. I've done nothing to annoy yer, have I?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"But you have been following me."

His manner changed at once.

"Ever since you left Piccadilly, Sir Thomas, waiting my opportunity. I'm a private inquiry agent by profession, though this job of shadowing you has nothing to do with the office that employs me. I have a young friend in my house who's turned up sudden and mysterious, a young friend I lost sight of many weeks ago. He says you'll come to him at once if I could only get you alone and be certain that no one saw me speak to you. His instructions were to follow you about until such an opportunity as this arose, and all the time I was to be certain that no one else was following you. I have ascertained that all right."

He put his head close to mine and I felt his hot breath upon my cheek.

"It's Mr. William Rolston, Sir Thomas," he said. "I'm not in his confidence, though I have long admired his abilities and predicted a great future for him. He's come to

me in distress and I am doing what I can to 'elp 'im—this being a day when they've no job for me at the office."

"Good Lord! why didn't you speak to me this morning, if you've been following me all day?"

He shook his head.

"Wouldn't have done. Mr. Rolston's instructions was different and he has his reasons, though I'm not in his confidence. I've done it out of admiration for his talents, and no doubt some day he'll be in a position to pay me for my work."

"Pay you, you idiot!" I could have taken him by the throat and shaken the fool. "Mr. Rolston knows very well that he can command any money he chooses. He's a member of my staff."

We were now walking along together towards Westminster.

"That's as may be," said my seedy friend, "but 'e 'adn't a brass farthing this morning, and come to that, Sir Thomas, if you'd got into another blinking taxi, you'd have snookered *me!*"

"Where do you live?" I asked impatiently.

"Not far from where you 'ad your lunch, Sir Thomas. 15, Imperial Mansions, Royal Road, Stepney."

"It's a magnificent address," I said, as I held out my stick for a cab.

"It's a block o' workmen's buildings, reely," he replied gloomily, "and in the thick of the Chinese quarter, which makes it none too savory. But an Englishman's house is his castle and he has the 'progative to call it what he likes."

Back east we went again and in half an hour I was mounting interminable stone steps to a door nearly at the top of "Imperial Mansions," which my guide, who during our drive had introduced himself to me as Mr. Herbert Sliddim, announced as his home. In a dingily furnished room, sitting on a molting, plush sofa I saw the curious little man to whom I had so taken months ago. He was shabby almost to beggary. His face was pale and worn, which gave him an aspect of being much older than I had imagined him. But his irrepressible ears stood out as of yore and his eyes were not dimmed.

"Hallo," I said, "glad to see you, Mr. Rolston, though you've neglected us at the office for a long time. Your arrears of salary have been mounting up."

His hand was trembling as I gripped it.

"Oh, Sir Thomas," he said, "do you really mean that I am still on the staff?"

"Of course you are, my dear boy."

I turned to Mr. Sliddim.

"Now I wonder," I said, "if I might have a little quiet conversation with Mr. Rolston."

"By all means," he replied. "I'll wait in the court-yard."

"I shouldn't do that, Mr. Sliddim. Why not take a tour round?"

I led him out of the room into the passage which served for hall, pressed a couple of pounds into his hand and had the satisfaction of seeing him leap away down the stairs like an antelope.

"That's all right," said Rolston. "Now he'll go and get blotto, it's the poor devil's failing. Still, he'll be happy."

I sat down, passed my cigarette case to Rolston, and waited for him to begin.

He sort of came to attention.

"I was rung up, Sir Thomas, at your flat—at least your valet was—and told to come to the office of the *Evening Special* at once."

"I know, go on."

"I dressed as quickly as I could, ran down the stairs and jumped into the waiting cab. The door banged and we started off. The engines must have been running, for we went away like a flash. There was some one else sitting there. A hand clapped over my mouth and an arm round my body. I couldn't move or speak. Then the thumb of the hand did something to the big nerves behind my ear. It's an Oriental trick and I had just realized it when something wet and sweet was pressed over my mouth and nose, and I lost all consciousness.

"When I woke up I found myself in a fair-sized room, lit by a skylight high up in the roof. There was a bed, a table, a chair, and various other conveniences, and I hadn't the slightest idea where I could be. My head ached and I felt bruised all over, so I drank a glass of water, crawled back into the bed and slept. When I woke again there was an affable Chink sitting by my side, who spoke quite good English.

"'You will,' he said, 'be kept here for some time in durance, yess. It's an unfortunate necessity, yess.'

"I heard on all sides familiar noises. I knew in a moment what had happened. I had been brought back to the works at the base of the three towers."

"All this fits in very well with what I now know, Rolston. I'll tell you everything in a minute, but I want to hear your story first."

"Very good, Sir Thomas. For over three months I've been kept a prisoner at Richmond. I wasn't badly treated. I had anything I liked to eat and drink, any books to read —tobacco, a bath—everything but newspapers, which were rigidly denied me. I wasn't kept entirely to my prison room. I was allowed to go out and take exercise within the domain surrounded by the great thirty-foot wall, though I was never let to roam about as I wished. There was always a big Chinese coolie with a leaded cane attending me, a man that only spoke a few words of English.

"Now, Sir Thomas, please remember this. From first to last none of my jailers knew that I understood Chinese. And none of them knew or suspected that I had been among the workmen before, in order to get materials for the scoop with which I came to you."

I saw the value of that at once.

"Good for you, Rolston; now please continue."

"Well, Sir Thomas, I kept my eyes and ears very wide open and I learnt a lot. Things were being prepared with a feverish activity of which the people outside had not the

slightest idea. I found that round the base of the towers, in the miniature park inclosed by the high wall, there were already magnificent vegetable gardens in active being. There were huge conservatories which must have been set up when the towers were only a few hundred feet high, now full of the rarest flowers and shrubs. In my walks, I saw a miniature poultry farm, conducted on the most up-to-date methods; there was a dairy, with four or five cows—already this part of the huge inclosure was assuming a rural aspect. It must have been planned and started nearly two years ago."

"You asked questions, I suppose?"

"Any amount, as innocently as I possibly could. I got very little out of my captors in reply. Your Chinaman is the most secretive person in the world. *But,* I heard them talking among themselves; and I was amazed at the calculated organization which had been going on without cessation from the beginning.

"It all fitted in exactly with what I told you at the *Special* office. It was as though Mr. Morse was planning a little private world of his own, which would be independent of everything outside."

"And about the towers themselves?"

"It will take me hours to tell you. In one quarter of the inclosure there are great dynamo sheds—an electric installation inferior to nothing else of its kind in the world. The great lifts which rise and fall in the towers are electric. Heating, lighting, artificial daylight for the conservatories—all are electric.

"Where I was kept," he went on, "was nearly a quarter of a mile from the engineering section, but I knew that it hummed with extraordinary activity night and day. I discovered that structural buildings of light steel were pouring in from America, that an army of decorators and painters was at work; vans of priceless Oriental furniture and hangings were arriving from all parts of the world, rare flowers and shrubs also. Sir Thomas, it was as though the Universe was being searched for wonders—all to be concentrated here.

"This went on and on till I lost count of the days and lived in a sort of dream, kindly treated enough, allowed to see many secret things, and always with a sense that because this was so, I should never again emerge into the real world."

"I can understand that, Rolston. Every word you say interests me extremely."

"I'll come to the present, Sir Thomas. You can ask me any details that you like afterwards. A few days ago everything was speeded up to extraordinary pitch. Then, late one night, there was a great to-do, and in the morning I learned that Mr. Morse and his family had arrived, and that they were up at the top. I have found out since that this was the fourteenth of September."

"The fourteenth!" I cried.

"Yes, Sir Thomas, the fourteenth. The next day, it was late in the afternoon and the sun was setting, two Chinamen came into my room, tied a handkerchief over my eyes and led me out. I was put into one of the little electric

railways—open cars which run all over the inclosure—and taken to the base of the towers.

"I don't know which tower it was, but I was led into a lift and a long, slow ascent began. I knew that I was in one of the big carrying lifts that take a long time to do the third of a mile up to the City, not one of the quick-running elevators which leap upwards from stage to stage for passengers and arrive at the top in a comparatively short space of time.

"When the lift stopped they took off the handkerchief and I found myself in a great whitewashed barn of a place which was obviously a storeroom. There were bales of stuff, huge boxes and barrels on every side.

"The men who had brought me up were just rough Chinese workmen from Hong Kong, but a door opened and a Chink of quite another sort came in and took me by the arm.

"You see, Sir Thomas," he explained, "to the ordinary Englishman one Chinaman is just like another, but my experience in the East enables me to distinguish at once.

"The newcomer was of a very superior class, and he led me out of the storeroom, across a swaying bridge of latticed steel to a little rotunda. As we passed along, I had a glimpse of the whole of London, far, far below. The Thames was like a piece of glittering string. Everything else were simply patches of gray, green, and brown.

"We went into the cupola and a tiny lift shot us up like a bullet until it stopped with a clank and I knew that I was now upon the highest platform of all.

"But I could see nothing, for we simply turned down a long corridor lighted by electricity and softly carpeted, which might have been the corridor of one of the great hotels far down below in town.

"My conductor, who wore pince-nez and a suit of dark blue alpaca and who had a charming smile, stopped at a door, rapped, and pushed me in.

"I found myself in a room of considerable size. It was a library. The walls were covered with shelves of old oak, in which there were innumerable books. A Turkey carpet, two or three writing-tables—and Mr. Gideon Morse, whom I had never spoken to, but had seen driving in Hyde Park, sat there smoking a cigar.

"I might have been in the library of a country house, except for two things. There were no windows to this large and gracious room. It was lit from above, like a billiard-room—domed skylights in the roof. But the light that came down was not a light like anything I had ever seen. It lit up every detail of the magnificent and stately place, but it was new—'the light that never was on earth or sea.' It was just that that made me realize where I was —two thousand three hundred feet up in the air, alone with Gideon Morse, who had snatched me out of life three months before."

"I know Mr. Morse, Rolston. What impression did he make on you?"

"For a moment he stunned me, Sir Thomas. I knew I was in the presence of a superman. All that I had heard about him, all the legends that surrounded his name, the

fact of this stupendous sky city in which I was—the ease with which he had stretched out his hand and made me a prisoner, all combined to produce awe and fear."

"Yes, go on."

"I saw two other things—I think I did. One was that the man's sanity is trembling in the balance. The other that if ever a human being lives and moves and has his being in deadly temporal fear, Gideon Mendoza Morse is that man."

The words rang out in that East-end room with prophetic force. It was as though a brilliant light was snapped on to illumine a dark chamber in my soul.

"What did he say to you, Rolston?"

"He was suavity and kindness itself. He said that he immensely regretted the necessity for secluding me so long. 'But of course I shall make it up to you. You're a young man, Mr. Rolston, only just commencing your career. A little capital would doubtless assist that career, in which I may say I have every belief. Shall we say that you leave Richmond this afternoon with a solatium of five hundred pounds?"

" 'A thousand would suit me better,' I said.

"He shrugged his shoulders, and suddenly smiled at me.

" 'Very well,' he said, 'let it be a thousand pounds.'

" 'Of course without prejudice, Mr. Morse.'

" 'Please explain yourself.'

" 'You've kidnaped me. You've also committed an offense against the law of England—a criminal offense for

which you will have to suffer. Perhaps you don't realize that if you built your house miles further up, if you managed to nearly reach the moon, British justice would reach you at last.'

"He shook his head sadly.

" 'To that point of view, I hardly agree, Mr. Rolston. I am quite unable to purchase British justice, but I can put such obstacles in its way that could—'

"He suddenly stopped there, lit a little brown cigarette, came up and patted me on the shoulder.

" 'Child,' he said, 'you are clever, you are original, I like you. But have a sense of proportion, and remember that you have no choice in this matter. I will give you the money you want on condition that you go away and bring no action whatever against me. If not—'

" 'If not, sir?'

" 'Well, you will have to stay here, that's all. You won't be badly treated. You can be librarian if you like, but you will never see the outside world again.'

" 'May I have a few hours to consider, sir?'

" 'A month if you like,' he said, pressing a bell upon his table.

"The same bland young Chinaman led me out of the library and down to the storeroom in the lift. I was blindfolded, and descended to the ground.

"There I met a man whom I had seen two or three times during the last three days, a great seven-foot American with arms like a gorilla, a thing called 'Boss Mulligan,' whom I had gathered from the conversation of my Chinese

friends, had now arrived to take charge of the whole city—a sort of head policeman and guard.

"'Sonny,' he said, 'I've had a 'phone down from the top in regard to you. Now don't you be a short sport. You've been made a good offer. You grip it and be like fat in lavender. My advice to you is to wind a smile round your neck and depart with the dollars. I can see you're full of pep and now you've got fortune before you. See that pavilion over there?'

"He pointed to where a little gaudily painted house nestled under one of the great feet of the first tower.

"'That's my mansion. You wander about for an hour or so and come there and say you agree to the boss's terms —we'll take your word for it. Upon the word "Yes," I'll hand you out at the gate and you can go to Paris for a trip.'

"'I'll think it over,' I said.

"'Do so, and don't be a life-everlasting, twenty-four-hours-a-day, dyed-in-the-wool damn fool.'

"It was getting dusk. I was in a new part of the inclosed park. He let me go without any watchful Chinese attendant at my heels, and I strolled off with my head bent down as if deep in thought.

"I'd got an hour, and I think I made the best use of it. I hurried along under the shadow of the towers, past shrubberies, artificial lakes, summer-houses and little inclosed rose-gardens until I was far away from Mr. Mulligan. Here and there I passed a patient Chinese gardener or some hurrying member of Morse's little army. But nobody

stopped me or interfered with me. For the first time since my captivity I was perfectly free.

"To cut a long story short, Sir Thomas, I came to a rectangle in the great encircling wall, which at that point was thirty feet high. The parapet at the top was obviously being repaired, for there was a ladder right up, pails of mortar, bricklayers' tools, and a coil of rope for binding scaffolding. I nipped up the ladder, carrying the rope after me, fixed it at the top, slid down easily enough, and in a quarter of an hour was in Richmond station. I didn't dare to go back to my old rooms because I was sure there would be a secret hue and cry after me. I thought of my old friend, Mr. Sliddim, traveled to Whitechapel with my last pence, and here I am."

"Still a member of my staff?"

"If you please, Sir Thomas."

"Ready for anything?"

"Anything and everything."

"Then come with me to Piccadilly—if they look for you there again we shall be prepared."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I HAVE to tell of a brief interlude before I got to work in earnest.

The very day after the rediscovery of Rolston I fell ill. The strain had been too much, a severe nervous attack was the result, and my vet. ordered me to the quietest watering-place in Brittany that I could find. I protested, but in vain. The big man told me what would happen if I didn't go, so I went, *faute-de-mieux,* and took Rolston with me.

I acquainted Arthur Winstanley and Pat Moore of my movements by letter, and I engaged the seedy Mr. Sliddim to abide permanently in Richmond and to forward me a full report of all he observed, and of all rumors, connected with the City in the Clouds. When I had subscribed to a press-cutting agency to send me everything that appeared in print relating to Gideon Morse and his fantastic home, I felt I had done everything possible until I should be restored to health.

Of my month in Pont Aven I shall say nothing save that I lived on fine Breton fare, walked ten miles a day, left Rolston—who proved the most interesting and stimulating companion a man could have—to answer all my letters, and went to bed at nine o'clock at night.

Heartache, fear for Juanita, occasional fits of fury at my own inaction and impotence? Yes, all these were with

me at times. But I crushed them down, forced myself to think as little as possible of her, in order that when once restored to health and full command of my nerves, I might begin the campaign I had planned. You must picture me therefore, one afternoon at the end of October, arriving from Paris by the five o'clock train, dispatching Rolston to Piccadilly with the luggage, and driving myself to Captain Moore's quarters at Knightsbridge Barracks.

I had summoned a meeting of our league, which we had so fancifully named "Santa Hermandad"—a fact that was to have future consequences which none of us ever dreamed of—by telegram from Paris.

Pat and Arthur were awaiting me in the former's comfortable sitting-room. A warm fire burned on the hearth as we sat down to tea and anchovy toast.

I had been in more or less frequent communication with both of them during my sick leave, and when we began to discuss the situation we dispensed with preliminaries.

It was Pat who, so to speak, took the chair, leaning against an old Welsh sideboard of oak, crowded with polo and shooting cups, shields for swordsmanship and other trophies.

"Now, you two," he said, "we know certain facts, and we have arrived at certain conclusions.

"First of all, as to the facts. Miss Morse is as good as engaged to Tom here. Arthur and I are 'also ran.' Fact number one. Fact number two, she has been suddenly and forcibly taken away from the world, and is in great distress of mind. That so, brother leaguers?"

We murmured assent.

"Now for our deductions. Morse, divil take him! has some deadly important reason for this fantastic, spectacular show of his. The public see it as the fancy of a chap who's so much money he don't know what to do with it, a fellow that's exhausted all sensation and is now trying for a new one. Let 'em think so! But *we* know—here in this room—a long sight more than the general public knows. Tom and that young fly-by-night, with the red hair and the stained-glass-window ears, he's been cartin' about with him, have got behind the scenes."

Pat's face hardened.

"We alone are certain that the man Morse, for all his equanimity and the mask he has presented to London during the season, has been living under the influence of some dirty, cowardly fear or other!"

Arthur interrupted.

"Fear, if you like, Pat, but I don't think it is probably dirty, or even cowardly. You get Miss Morse."

"Perhaps you're right. At any rate, if Gideon Morse is really menaced by some great danger, what cleverer trick could he have played? To let the world suppose that it's his whim and fancy to live like a rook at the top of an elm tree, when all the time he's providing against the possibility of annihilation, that's a stroke of genius."

"Good for you, Pat," said Arthur with a wink to me, "you're on the track of it."

"Indeed, and I think I am," said the big guardsman simply, "and here's the cunning of it, the supreme sense of

self-preservation. If that man Morse is in fear of his life, and in fear for his daughter's too, he couldn't have invented a more perfect security than he has done. From all we know, from all Tom has told us, no one can get at them now but an archangel!"

Then Arthur spoke.

"For my part," he said, "as I'm vowed to the service, I'm going straight to Brazil and I'm going to find out everything I can about the past life of Gideon Morse. I speak Spanish as you know. I think I'm fairly diplomatic, and in a little more than a couple of months I'll return with big news, if I'm not very much mistaken. And there's always the cable too. We are pledged to Tom, but beyond that we're united together to save the little lady from evil or from harm. To-morrow I sail for Rio."

"And I," I said, "have already made my plans. To-morrow I disappear absolutely from ordinary life. Only two people in London will know where I am, and what I am doing—Preston, my servant in Piccadilly, and one other whom I shall appoint at the offices of my paper. While Arthur is gathering information which will be of the greatest use, I must be working on the spot. I imagine there isn't much time to lose."

"And what'll I do?" asked Pat Moore.

"You, Pat, will stay here, lead your ordinary life, and hold yourself ready for anything and everything when I call upon you. And as far as I can see," I concluded, "there will be a very pressing necessity for your help before much more water has flowed under Richmond Bridge."

There was an end of talking; we were all in deadly earnest. We grasped hands, arranged a system of communication, and then I and Arthur went down the stone steps, across the parade ground, and said good-by at Hyde Park corner.

"You—?" he said.

"You will see in the papers that Sir Thomas Kirby is gone for a voyage round the world."

"And as a matter of fact?"

"I think I won't give you any details, old man. My plan is a very odd one indeed. You wouldn't quite understand, and you'd think it extraordinary—as indeed it is."

"It can't be more fantastic than the whole bitter business," he said, and his voice was full of pain.

I saw, for the first time, that he had grown older in the last few months. The boyishness in him which had been one of his charms, was passing away definitely and forever. He was hard hit, as we all were, and I reproached myself for my egotism. After all, if there was any hope at all, I was the most fortunate. Arthur and stanch old Pat Moore were giving up their time, their energies, to bring about a conclusion from which I alone should benefit.

We were crossing the Green Park as this was borne in upon me. It was a dull, gray afternoon, rapidly deadening into evening. There seemed no color anywhere. But when I thought of the faithful, uncomplaining, even joyous adherence to our oath, when I understood for the first time how these two friends of mine were laboring without hope

of reward, then I saw, as in a vision, the wonder and sacredness of unselfish love.

"Arthur," I said, as we were about to part at Hyde Park corner, "God forgive me, but I believe your love for her is greater than mine."

"Don't say that, Tom. When we threw the dice, if the Queen had come to me you would be doing what I am doing now, or what Pat is ready to do."

Well, of course, that was true, but when we gripped hands and turned our backs upon each other, I walked slowly towards my flat with a hanging head.

For one brief moment I had caught a glimpse of that love which Dante speaks of—that love "which moves earth and all the stars"—and in the presence of so high a thing I was bowed and humbled.

Let me also be worthy of such company, was my prayer.

. . . . . .

At ten o'clock the next morning I stood in my bedroom with Preston in attendance. Preston's face, usually a well-bred mask which showed nothing of his feelings, was gravely distressed.

"Shall I do, Preston?" I asked.

"Yes, Sir Thomas, you'll *do*," he said regretfully, "but I must say, Sir Thomas, that—"

"Shut up, Preston, you've said quite enough. Am I the real thing or not?"

"Certainly not, Sir Thomas," he said with spirit. "How could you be the real thing? But I'm bound to say you *look* it."

"You mean that your experience of a small but prosperous suburban public-house, visited principally by small tradespeople, leads you to suppose that I might pass very well for the landlord of such a place?"

"I am afraid it does, Sir Thomas," he replied with a gulp, as I surveyed myself once more in the long mirror of my wardrobe door.

I was about six feet high in my boots, fair, with a ruddy countenance and somewhat fleshy face—not gross I believe, but generally built upon a generous scale.

That morning I had shaved off my mustache, had my hair arranged in a new way—that is to say, with an oily curl draping over the forehead—and I had very carefully penciled some minute crimson veins upon my nose. I ought to say that I have done a good deal of amateur acting in my time and am more or less familiar with the contents of the make-up box.

[NOTE.—My master, Sir Thomas Kirby, has long been known as one of the handsomest gentlemen in society. He has a full face certainly, but entirely suited to his build and physical development. Of course, when he shaved off a mustache that was a model of such adornments, it did alter his appearance considerably.—HENRY PRESTON.]

Instead of the high collar of use and wont, I wore a low one, permanently attached to what I believe is known as a "dicky"—that is to say, a false shirt front which reaches but little lower than the opening of the waistcoat. My tie was a made-up four-in-hand of crimson satin—not too new,

my suit of very serviceable check with large side-pockets, purchased second-hand, together with other oddments, from a shop in Covent Garden. I also wore a large and massive gold watch-chain, and a diamond ring upon the little finger of my right hand.

That was all, yet I swear not one of my friends would have known me, and what was more important still, I was typical without having overdone it. No one in London, meeting me in the street, would have turned to look twice at me. You could not say I was really disguised—in the true meaning of the word—and yet I was certainly entirely transformed, and with my cropped hair, except for the "quiff" in front, I looked as blatant and genial a bounder as ever served a pint of "sixes."

Preston had left the room for a moment and now came back to say that Mr. W. W. Power had arrived.

W. W. Power was the youngest partner in a celebrated firm of solicitors, Power, Davids and Power—a firm that has acted for my father and myself for more years than I can remember.

Under his somewhat effeminate exterior and a languid manner, young Power is one of the sharpest and cleverest fellows I know, and, what's more, one that can keep his mouth shut under any circumstances.

I went into the dining-room, hoping to make him start. Not a bit of it. He merely put up his eyeglass and said laconically: "You'll do, Sir Thomas"—not more than two years ago he had been an under-graduate at Cambridge!

"You think so, Power?"

He nodded and looked at his watch.

"All right then, we'll be off," I said, and Preston called a taxi, on which were piled a large brass-bound trunk and a shabby portmanteau—also recent purchases, and with the name H. Thomas painted boldly upon them. Preston's Christian name by the way is Henry and I had borrowed it for the occasion.

I got into the cab with a curious sensation that some one might be looking on and discover me. Power seated himself by my side with no indication of thought at all, and we rolled away westward.

"Nothing remains," he said, "but to complete the documents of sale. Everything is ready, and I have the money in notes in my pocket. The solicitor of the retiring proprietor will be in attendance, and the whole thing won't take more than twenty minutes. Newby, the present man, will then step out and leave you in undisturbed possession."

"Very good, Power, and thank you for your negotiations. Seven thousand pounds seems a lot of money for a little hole like that."

"It isn't really. You see the place is freehold and the house is free also. It's not under the dominion of any brewer, and when your purpose in being there is over, I'll guarantee to sell it again for the same money, probably a few hundreds more. As an investment it's sound enough."

He relapsed into silence and we rattled through Hammersmith on our way to Richmond. I was curious about this imperturbable young man, whom I knew rather well.

"Aren't you curious, Power," I said, "to know why I'm

doing this extraordinary, unprecedented thing? I can trust you absolutely I know, but haven't you asked yourself what the deuce I'm up to?"

He favored me with a pale smile.

"My dear Sir Thomas," he replied, "if you only knew what extraordinary things society people *do* do, if you knew a tenth of what a solicitor in my sort of practice knows, you wouldn't think there was anything particularly strange in your little freak."

Confound the cub! I could have punched him in the jaw. I knew his assurance was all pose. Still it was admirable in its way and I burst into hearty laughter.

I had the satisfaction of seeing Master Power's cheeks faintly tinged with pink!

On the slope of the hill, at what one might describe as the back of the high wall which inclosed the grounds at the foot of the three towers—that is to say, it was exactly opposite the great central entrance, and I suppose nearly quarter of a mile from it if one drew a straight line from one to the other—was a crowded huddle of mean streets. It was not in any sense a slum—nothing so picturesque—small, drab, shabby, and respectable. In the center of this area was a fair-sized, but old-fashioned, public-house, known as the "Golden Swan." This was our destination, and in a few minutes more we had climbed the hill and the taxi stood at rest before a side door.

Opening it we entered, Power leading the way, and as we approached some stairs I caught a glimpse of a little plush-furnished bar to the left, where I could have sworn

I saw the melancholy Sliddim in company with a pewter pot.

We waited for a moment or two in a long upstairs room. The walls were covered with beasts, birds, and fishes, in glass cases, all of which looked as if they ought to be decently buried. Upon one wall was an immense engraving framed in boxwood of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and upon a huge mahogany sideboard which looked as if it had been built to resist a cavalry charge, was a tray with hospitable bottles.

Then the door opened and a dapper little man with side whiskers, the vendor's solicitor, came in, accompanied by Mr. Newby, the retiring landlord himself.

Mr. Newby, dressed I was glad to notice, very much as myself, only the diamond ring upon his finger was rather larger, was a short, fat man of benevolent aspect, and I should say suffering from dropsy. We shook hands heartily.

"Thirty years have I been landlord here," wheezed Mr. Newby, "and now it's time the 'ouse was in younger 'ands. Your respectability 'as been vouched for, Mr. Thomas—I wouldn't sell to no low blackguard for twice the money—and all I can say is, young feller, for you *are* a young feller to me, you know—I 'ope you'll be as 'appy and prosperous in the 'Golden Swan' as Emanuel Newby 'ave been."

I thought it was best to be a little awkward and bashful, so I said very little while the lawyers fussed about with title deeds, and at last the eventful moment came when one does that conjuring trick in which the gentlemen of the law take such infantile delight. "Put your finger here, yes, on this red seal and say . . ."

When it was all done and Mr. Newby had stowed away seven thousand pounds in bank-notes in a receptacle over his heart, we drank to the occasion in some remarkably good champagne and then, with a sigh, the ex-proprietor announced his intention of being off.

"My luggage has preceded me," he said, "and I have nothing to do now but retire, as I 'ave long planned, to the city of my birth."

"And where may that be, Mr. Newby?" I asked politely.

"The University City of Oxford," he replied, "which, if you've not known intimate as I 'ave, you can never begin to understand. There's an atmosphere there, Mr. Thomas, but Lord, you won't be interested!" and he wheezed superior.

The situation was not without humor.

When he had gone, together with his solicitor, Power rang the bell.

"As you wish me to manage everything for you," he said, "I have done so. Your entire ignorance of the liquor trade will be compensated by the knowledge and devotion of the assistant I have procured for you, after many inquiries. His name is Whistlecraft, and he is an Honest Fool. He won't rob you, though he'll probably diminish your profits greatly by his stupidity—but as I understand, profit from the sale of drinks isn't your object. He will obey orders implicitly, without even trying to understand their reason, and in short you couldn't have a better man for your purpose."

When Whistlecraft appeared I perfectly agreed with

Power. He was a powerful fellow in shirt sleeves, aged about thirty-five, with arms that could have felled an ox. Had he shaved within the last three days he would have been clean shaved, and his hair was polished to a mirror-like surface with suet—I caught him doing it one day. I never saw such calm on any human face. It was the tranquillity of an entire absence of intellect, a rich and perfect stupidity which nothing could penetrate, nothing disturb. His eyes were dull as unclean pewter, without life or speculation, and I knew at once that if I told him to go down into the cellar, wait there till a hyena entered, strangle it, skin it, and bring the pelt upstairs to me, he would depart upon his errand without a word!

Power went away with the most conventional of handshakes—we might have been parting in Pall Mall—and I was left alone, monarch of all I surveyed.

"What's the staff beside you, Whistlecraft?" I asked.

"Mrs. Abbs, sir, cooks and sweeps up, sleeps out. Peter, the odd-job boy, washes bottles and such, and that's all."

"Then at closing time, you and I are left alone in the house?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a loud and impatient knocking from somewhere below.

"I'd better go and serve, sir, hadn't I?" said Whistlecraft—I found later his name was Stanley—and I let him go at that.

I spent the next hour going over the premises from

cellar to roof and making many mental notes, for I had come here with a definite purpose, and plans already made.

It was an extraordinary situation to be in. I sat in a little private room behind the bar and every now and again Stanley's idiot countenance appeared, and I had to go behind the counter and be introduced to this or that regular frequenter. I asked every one to have a drink, for the good of the house, and trust I made a fair impression. They all seemed quiet, respectable people enough, who knew each other well.

In the evening I was greatly helped by Sliddim, who was now a seasoned habitué of the "Golden Swan," and whom from the moment of my arrival slipped into the position of Master of the Ceremonies, which saved me a great deal of trouble.

It will be remembered that all the time that I was in Brittany, Sliddim had been employed in my interests at Richmond. Bill Rolston vouched absolutely for the man's fidelity: had told me I could safely trust him in any way. Accordingly, there was perhaps a little misgiving, I had released him from his employment at the third-class detective agency where he worked, and took him permanently into my service. I may say at once, though he took no prominent part in the great events which followed until the very end, he was of considerable use to me and kept my secrets perfectly.

At closing time that night, Mrs. Abbs, the cook, having spread a hot supper in the private room behind the bar

and left, I called the potman in from his washing-up of glass and bade him share the meal.

"Now I tell you what, Stanley," I said, when we had filled our pipes, "in the tower inclosure there's a whole colony of Chinks, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir; gardeners, stokers for the engines and such like. They say as there isn't a white man among 'em, except only the boss, and he's an Irishman."

"They don't always live inside that wall?" I jerked my head towards a window which looked out into my back yard, not a hundred feet away from the towering precipice of brick which overshadowed the "Golden Swan," and the surrounding houses.

"Oh, not by no means. They comes out when their work's done in the evenings, though they goes back to sleep and has to be in by a certain time. They do say," and here something happened to Stanley's face which I afterwards grew to recognize as a smile, "they do say as some of the girls downtown are takin' up with 'em, seein' as they dress well, and spend a lot of money."

"I suppose they have somewhere where they go?"

"It's mostly the 'Rising Sun' down by the station, I am told. The boss there was a sailor and understands their ways. He's given them a room to themselves."

I was perfectly aware of all this, but I had a special motive for the present conversation.

"Now, it's come into my mind," I said, "that there's a lot of custom going downtown that ought by rights to come to the 'Golden Swan,' seeing that we are close at the

gates, so to speak, and I mean to do what I can to get hold of it. A Chink's money is as good as anybody else's, Stanley, that's my way of looking at it."

He chewed the cud of that idea for a minute or two and then it dawned in the pudding of his mind.

"Why, yes," he said, in the voice of one who had made a great discovery.

"Now, there's that room upstairs," I went on, "I shall never use it. If we could get some of these Chinks to drop in there of a night it would be good business."

"There's just one thing against it," said Stanley, "if you'll pardon my speaking of it, sir. I'm willing to do everything in reason, and I'm not afraid of work. But I don't see as 'ow I can attend to both the saloon and the four-ale bars if I'm to be going upstairs slinging drinks to the Chinks."

"Of course you can't and I wasn't going to suggest it. We must get an extra help—if we can get the Chinks to use the house. We might have a barmaid."

He shook his head.

"It wouldn't work, sir; you'd have to get a new one every week. A young woman can't resist a Chink and they'd marry off like—"

Stanley was unable to think of a simile so he buried his face in his pewter pot.

Really things were going very well for me.

"I believe you are right. Supposing I could get a young fellow who was one of themselves and could speak their lingo. There are lots to be picked up about the docks.

I mean some quiet young Chink, who would attend to his fellow-countrymen in the evening, and relieve you of a lot of the washing-up and things of that sort during the day?"

Mr. Stanley Whistlecraft was not so stupid as to miss the advantages of such a proposal as this.

"You've 'it on the very plan, sir," he said, "and especial if he could wash up them thin glasses which the gentlemen in the saloon bar like to 'ave, it would be a great saving. I never could 'andle them things properly. You put your fingers on 'em and they crack worse than eggs. Pewters, I can polish with any man alive, pot mugs seldom break, as likewise them thick reputed half-pints which will break a man's 'ed open, as I've proved. But these Chinks are as 'andy as any girl, and I think, sir, you've got 'old of an idea."

"I'll see about it in the morning. I've got a pal that has a nice little house in the Mile End Road, and I believe he could send me just the lad I want. Well, now you can go to bed, Stanley. Everything locked up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll put out the lights."

He bade me a gruff good-night and lurched heavily away. I heard him ascending the stairs to his room at the back of the house and then I was left alone.

The first thing I did was to turn down the sleeves of my shirt and put on my coat. It isn't etiquette to sup in your coat, I had gathered from Mr. Whistlecraft's custom when he accepted my invitation.

Then I unlocked a drawer in which was a box of cigars

such as the "Golden Swan" had never known, and stretching out my legs, stared into the fire.

I was doing the wildest, maddest thing, but so far all had gone well. I was, as it were, a solitary swimmer in deep and dangerous waters, on the threshold of experiences which I knew instinctively would transcend all those of ordinary life. I was perfectly certain, something in my inmost soul told me, that I was about to step into unknown perils, and to contend with bizarre and sinister forces of which I had no means of measuring the power or extent.

I don't mind admitting that on that first night in the "Golden Swan," fate weighed heavily on me and I thought I heard the muffled laughter of malignant things.

However, I was in for it now. I finished my cigar, went into the bar and selected a certain bottle of whisky—the excellent Stanley had warned me that this was the landlord's bottle and of a much more reputable quality than that served to the landlord's guests. After a very moderate "nightcap" I put on carpet slippers and went up to my room, which I had chosen at the very top of the house. It was a large attic, just under the roof, and in a few days I proposed to make it more habitable with some new furniture and decoration. Meanwhile, I had chosen it because, in one corner, some wooden steps went up to a trap-door which opened on to the roof, where there was a flat space of some three yards square among the chimneys. Just before going up to bed I turned up the collar of my dressing-gown, ascended the ladder, pushed open the trap-door and stepped out on to the leads.

It was a still, moonlight night. Looking over the roofs of the houses I could see the Thames winding like a silver ribbon far down below, a scene of utter tranquillity and peace.

Then I wheeled round to be confronted with the great black wall which rose several yards above me, within a pistol shot of distance.

But my eye traveled up beyond that and was caught in a colossal network of steel, so bold, towering and gigantic in its nearness that it almost made me reel. I stared up among the dark shadows and moonlit spaces till my eye reached an altitude which I knew to be about the height of the Golden Ball on the top of Saint Paul's Cathedral.

There the vision checked. I could see a blurr of low buildings, a web of latticed galleries, and I knew that I was looking only up at the very *first stage* of the City in the Clouds, which must be lying bare to the moon some sixteen hundred feet above.

I could see no more. The first stage barred all further vision, though that in itself seemed terrible in its height and majesty. So I closed my eyes and imagined only those supreme heights where she must be sleeping.

"Good-night, Juanita," I murmured, and then, as I descended into my room the words of the Psalmist came to me and I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the afternoon of the next day the potman summoned me from my private room with the information that there was a young fellow from the Mile End Road to see me.

"Chinese?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then it must be the lad come in answer to the telegram I sent to my friend this morning. Show him in."

In a few moments the applicant for the situation entered. He wore his oily black hair fairly short, like most of the Chinamen employed at the towers, and had no pigtail; he was dressed in European clothes. His high cheek bones, with little slits of eyes above them, the stolid yellow face and fine tapering fingers were typically Oriental as he glided in, and his European clothes seemed to accentuate that air of Eastern mystery that even the commonest Chinaman carries about with him. He looked about five or six and twenty and wore a thick gold ring in each ear which had had the effect of dragging them away from the head.

I examined him carefully as to his qualities and he answered in better English than most Chinamen attain to, though with the guttural, clicking accent of his kind.

"Take him and let him wash up a few of the glasses, Stanley, and ask him a few questions if you like, and if you are satisfied with him I'll engage him."

In a quarter of an hour the Honest Fool returned to express himself pleased with the young Asiatic's performances, and there and then I engaged him, Stanley showing him the room in which he was to sleep. It was quite late that night before I could be alone with the new assistant, who, by the way, served in the saloon bar during the evening and was spoken of with commendation by Mr. Carter, fish and green grocer; Mr. Mogridge, our principal news-agent and tobacconist, and Mr. Abrahams, dealer in anything, whose shop was labeled—really with great propriety —"Antiques."

These gentlemen were my most constant patrons and their word had weight, and it was endorsed by Mr. Sliddim, who slipped in about nine and in the position of a friend of the landlord, had been received into our best circle. It was Mr. Mogridge, a wit, who, just before closing time, christened Ah Sing, the name of the new potman, "Ting-A-Ling-A-Ling," the name which he retained to the end of the chapter. I could hear my clients laughing for the twentieth time as they went home and Mr. Carter's rich bass: "Mogridge, I call that good. That's damned good, Mogridge. *Ting-A-Ling-A-Ling!* Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Ah Sing glided into my private room just as the upper portion of the house began to tremble with the snores of the Honest Fool. He put his fingers into his mouth and withdrew two pads of composition such as dentists use, with a sigh of relief. Immediately the high cheek bones and the narrowness of the eyes disappeared, though even then Bill Rolston would have passed for a Chinaman at a

glance, though when he removed the quills from his nose and it ceased to be flat and distended, the likeness was less apparent.

"It's wonderful, Rolston," I said, shaking him warmly by the hand. "It would deceive any one. Well, here we are and now we can begin."

The lad was all fire and enthusiasm. He did me no end of good, for the sordid environment, the appalling meals—principally of pork served in great gobbets with quantities of onions—which Mrs. Abbs provided for the H.F., herself and me, and above all the overpowering, incredible structure at hand which seemed, in its strength and majesty, to laugh at the ant-like activities of such an one as I, were beginning to depress and to tinge my hours with the quality of a fantastic dream.

But Rolston changed all that and we talked far on into the night, planning, plotting, and arranging all the details of our campaign.

"To-morrow," he said, "I'll paint the board to go over the side door, in black and gilt Chinese lettering. As soon as it's done, we will make one or two alterations to the upstairs room, buy a gas urn with constant hot water and some special tea which I know where to get. When that's done, I'll start the game by going down to the 'Rising Sun' and meeting the Chinese there."

"You are quite certain that you won't be discovered?"

"I think it's in the last degree improbable. Certainly no one could find me out owing to my speech. That I can assure you, Sir Thomas, and it's nearly all the battle. So

very, very few Europeans ever attain to good colloquial Chinese that there would never be a doubt in any one but I was what I seemed to be. I not only know the language, but I know how these people think and most of their customs. As far as disguise goes, I think it's good enough to deceive any one. When I was a prisoner within the inclosure, the Chinese who saw me were for the most part coolies and laborers, engaged upon the works. All these have now gone away forever and there's only the regular, selected staff. Some of these of course must have seen me as I was, but I don't think they will penetrate my get-up. You see the whole shape of the face is altered to begin with, and the coloring of hair and face has been done so well as to defy detection. I certainly was afraid about my ears," and he grinned ruefully, "but I saw the way out by having them pierced and these rings put in. Most of the natives from the Province of Yün-Nan, where I come from, wear these rings. The ones I have on at the present moment are made of lead, and gilded. They have pulled my ears right out of their ordinary shape."

"Good Lord!" I cried, astounded at the length to which he had gone. "You're torturing yourself for me."

"Not a bit of it, Sir Thomas," he replied. "I—I rather like it!"

"And you think you will be able to get us a Chinese clientèle?"

"I am quite certain of it. First of all I don't suppose I shall get the best class—I mean the upper and more confidential servants who ascend the tower itself—for I un-

derstand there's a very rigid system of grades. But little by little they will come also. It will take us weeks, maybe months, but it will be done."

"If it takes me half a lifetime I'll go through with it," I said savagely.

"My sentiments, also," he replied, lighting a cigarette. "By the way, I hope you're not incommoded in any way by my—er—odor!"

"Good Heaven! What do you mean?"

"The Chinaman smells quite different to the European, though not necessarily unpleasantly. It's taken me quite a lot of trouble to attain the essential perfume!"

He grinned impishly as he said it, and there certainly was a sort of stale, camphory smell, now he mentioned it.

"You're a great artist, Rolston, and I don't know what I should do without you, oh, Mandarin from Yün-Nan!"

"That's another point," he said quickly. "You wouldn't guess why I'm supposed to come from Yün-Nan, where I actually did spend some years of my childhood?"

"Not in the least."

"It's the principal opium producing Province in China," he replied, with a quick look at me. "Now, Sir Thomas, I've let the cat out of the bag. You see how I propose to attract the Chinese here, and get into their confidence."

A light flashed in upon me, and I took a long breath.

"But it would never do," I said. "If we were to start an opium den in that room upstairs, we should have the police in in a fortnight, and then the game would be up entirely."

He smiled superior.

"There will never be a single pipe of opium smoked in the 'Golden Swan,'" he said. "Of that I can assure you. That will be the very strictest rule that I shall make, but I shall supply opium to the customers, in varying quantities, and at intervals, according to the need of each individual case. It is almost impossible to bribe a Chinaman with money—the better sort, that is, the picked and chosen men who will be around Mr. Morse himself. But opium is quite another thing, and besides they won't know they're being bribed. I sat hours and hours working this thing out and I'm confident it's the only way."

When he said that I realized that he spoke the truth, but I confess that the idea startled and alarmed me.

"We shall be breaking the law, Rolston. We shall be risking heavy fines and certain imprisonment if we're found out."

"To that I would say two things, Sir Thomas. First of all, that no fine matters; and secondly, that I shouldn't in the least mind doing six months if necessary. This great game is worth more than that. But secondly, and you may really put your mind at ease, we shall *not* be found out. I have worked the thing out to a hair's breadth and my system is so complete that discovery is utterly impossible."

"I oughtn't to let you risk it, though of course I shall share equally if anything happens."

He disregarded this entirely.

"But the stuff," I said, "the opium itself, how will you get that?"

"I have made my plans here also. I shall have to pay a price so enormous that I'm afraid it will stagger you, Sir Thomas, but it's the only way in which I can get hold of the right stuff. For what it is intrinsically worth, about sixty pounds sterling, your east-end dealer will pay four-hundred pounds, and make a big profit on it. I shall have to pay nearly a thousand and I shall want double that money —two thousand pounds."

He stared at me in anxiety.

"My dear Rolston," I said, "cheer up. My income is over twenty thousand a year, and in normal times I don't spend a third of it. Buy all the filth you want, and Heaven send that it does the trick!"

"In two days," he said, "the 'Golden Swan' will house two cases of the best 'red bricks' obtainable on the market anywhere, for it's as much by the superior quality of what I shall supply, as well as the fact of being able to supply it, that I depend. Of course, you'll get nearly all the money back."

"Confound it, no, that's going too far. We'll send all the abominable profits to the Richmond Hospital anonymously."

We talked until the fire was out and the gray wintry dawn began to steal in through the dirty windows of the bar beyond, and when all our plans were laid with meticulous care I went to bed but not to sleep, assailed by a thousand doubts and fears.

. . . In a week or two the upstairs room began to be frequented by silent-footed yellow men, who came and went

unobtrusively. Whenever any of them chanced to meet me I was greeted with a profound obeisance which was rather disconcerting at first, but my conversation was limited to a mere greeting or farewell. Most of these men spoke pigeon English, but I had little or nothing to say to them of set purpose. It had been arranged between Rolston and myself that I was to be represented as a good-natured fool, who mattered very little in any way.

For his part, the pretended Ah Sing was up and down the stairs a dozen times every evening. He was never once suspected, his influence and importance in the lives of these aliens grew every day. But it was a long business, a long and weary business, in which at first hardly any progress towards our aim could be discerned.

"It's no use being discouraged, Sir Thomas," Rolston would say, "we're getting on famously."

"And the opium?"—somehow I wasn't very keen on discussing that aspect of the question.

"I'm employing it most judiciously, selling it in very small quantities, and of course not a grain is ever smoked or consumed in any way upon these premises. That's thoroughly understood by every one, and you need not have the slightest doubt but that the secret will be rigidly kept. At present the men frequenting the house are nearly all of the upper coolie class. That is to say, they are the gardeners, stokers of the power house, sweepers, and so forth. But, quite recently a better class of man has made his appearance. There's a young, semi-Europeanized electrician who has been once or twice. Moreover, I have gained a

great point. I have become acquainted with Kwang-su, the keeper of the inclosure gate."

"That's certainly something," I replied, recalling the figure of the gigantic Chinaman in question, which was familiar to most of the residents beneath the wall. "He's a ferocious-looking brute."

"At one time he was headsman of Yangtsun, and they say a most finished expert with the sword," Rolston remarked with a grin. "All I know about him is that he'd sell his soul for the black smoke, and regards me as a most valuable addition to the neighborhood. In a fortnight or so, I am pretty certain I shall be able to pass in and out of the grounds pretty much as I like, and then a great move in our game will have been accomplished. As an undoubted Chinaman and as a confidential purveyer of opium, I shall soon have complete freedom below the towers."

"But what about the great prizefighter, Mulligan?"

"He has nothing to do with the park, as they call all the grounds around the towers. Now that the building is finished his functions are up in the air, and I gather that he lives on the third stage, just beneath the City itself, as a sort of watch-dog. The Asiatics are entirely managed by their own leaders, appointed by Morse himself."

It was as Bill predicted. In a very short space of time he was away from the "Golden Swan" as much as he was in it, and every day he gathered more and more information about the tower and its mistress—information which was carefully noted down in the silence of the night, so that no detail should be forgotten.

Of course the fact that my hotel had become a haunt of the yellow men neither escaped the notice of the neighbors, nor of the police. The former were easily dealt with, and especially my patrons. Mr. Mogridge, having invented "Ting-A-Ling-A-Ling," was disposed to look upon the "Chinks" with genial patronage, and his self-importance was gratified by the low bows with which they always greeted him as they passed to their club-room above. The lead of Mr. Mogridge was followed by others in the saloon bar, and Sliddim tactfully kept everything running smoothly. As for the police, they paid me one visit or two, were shown everything and were perfectly satisfied that the house was being conducted with propriety—as indeed it was.

The yellow men neither gambled nor got drunk, that was perfectly obvious. There was never a suspicion of opium from first to last, nor was there a single instance of a brawl or a fight. Indeed the local police-inspector, an excellent fellow with whom I had many a talk, expressed himself as being both surprised and delighted at the way in which I had the aliens in hand.

Nearly two months had gone by, and I was curbing the raging fires of impatience and longing as well as I could when two incidents occurred which greatly precipitated action.

Rolston came to me one day in a state of great excitement.

At last, he said, he was beginning to become acquainted with some of the actual officials of the towers—at last, quite separate from those who worked below. They were

interested, or beginning to be so, and he urged me at once to open a smaller, inner room as a select meeting-place for such of them as he could inveigle to the "Golden Swan."

We did so at once, hanging the walls with a drapery of black worked with golden dragons, which I bought in Regent Street, a Chinese lantern of copper hanging from the ceiling, and around the wall we placed low couches. Here, in twos and threes, but in slowly increasing numbers, a different type of Oriental began to assemble, Ah Sing attending to all their wants, ingratiating himself in every possible way, and keeping his extremely useful ears wide open—very wide open indeed.

It was now that tiny fragments of personal gossip—more precious to me than rubies—began to filter through. I had established no communication with the City in the Clouds as yet, but I seemed to hear the distant murmur of voices through the void.

One evening about eight o'clock I felt cramped and unutterably bored. I felt that nothing could help me but a long walk and so, with a word to the Honest Fool, Sliddim and Rolston, I took my hat and stick and started out.

It was a brilliant moonlight night, calm, still, and with a white frost upon the ground, as I descended the terrace and made my way down to the side of the river. Here and there I passed a few courting couples; the hum of distant London and the rumbling of trains was like the ground swell of a sea, but peace brooded over everything. The trees made black shadows like Chinese ink upon silver, and, in the full moonlight it was bright enough to read.

When I had walked a mile or so, resisting a certain temptation as well as I could, I stopped and turned at last.

There, a mile away behind me, yet seeming as if it was within a stone's throw, was the huge erection on the hill. Every detail of the lower parts was clear and distinct as an architectural drawing, the intricate lattice-work of enormous cantilevers and girders seemed etched on the inside of a great opal bowl. I can give you no adequate description of the immensity, the awe-inspiring, almost terror-inducing sense of magnitude and majesty. I have stood beside the Pyramids at night, I have crossed the Piazza of Saint Peter's at Rome under the rays of the Italian moon, and I have drunk coffee at the base of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, but not one of these experiences approached what I felt now as I surveyed, in an ecstasy of mingled emotions, this monstrous thing that brooded over London.

The eye traveled up, onward and forever up until at length, not hidden by clouds now but a faint blur of white, blue, gold, and tiny twinkling lights, hung in the empyrean the far-off City of Desire.

Could she hear the call of my heart? God knows it seemed loud and strong enough to me! Might she not be, even at this moment, a lovelier Juliet, leaning over some gilded gallery and wondering where I was?

"Was ever a woman so high above her lover before?" I said, and laughed, but my laughter was sadness, and my longing, pain unbearable.

. . . There was a slight bend in the tow-path where I stood, caused by some out-jutting trees, and from just

below I suddenly heard a burst of loud and brutal laughter, followed by a shrill cry. It recalled me from dreamland at once and I hurried round the projection to come upon a strange scene. Two flash young bullies with spotted handkerchiefs around their throats and ash sticks in their hands were menacing a third person whose back was to the river. They were sawing the air with their sticks just in front of a thin, tall figure dressed in what seemed to be a sort of long, buttoned black cassock descending to the feet, and wearing a skull cap of black alpaca. Beneath the skull cap was a thin, ascetic face, ghastly yellow in the moonlight.

. . . One of the brutes lunged at the man I now saw to be a Chinese of some consequence, lunged at him with a brutal laugh and filthy oath. The Chinaman threw up his lean arms, cried out again in a thin, shrill scream, stepped backwards, missed his footing and went souse into the river. In a second the current caught him and began to whirl him away over towards the Twickenham side. It was obvious that he could not swim a stroke. There was a clatter of hob-nailed boots and bully number one was legging it down the path like a hare. I had just time to give bully number two a straight left on the nap which sent him down like a sack of flour, before I got my coat off and dived in.

Wow! but it was icy cold. For a moment the shock seemed to stop my heart, and then it came right again and I struck out heartily. It didn't take long to catch up with the gentleman in the cassock, who had come up

for the second time and apparently resigned himself to the worst. I got hold of him, turned on my back and prepared for stern measures if he should attempt to grip me.

He didn't. He was the easiest johnny to rescue possible, and in another five minutes I'd got him safely to the bank and scrambled up.

There was nobody about, worse luck, and I started to pump the water out of him as well as I could, and after a few minutes had the satisfaction of seeing his face turn from blue-gray to something like its normal yellow under the somewhat ghastly light of the moon. His teeth began to chatter as I jerked him to his feet and furiously rubbed him up and down.

I tried to recall what I knew of pigeon English.

"Bad man throw you in river. You velly lucky, man come by save you, Johnny."

I had the shock of my life.

"I am indeed fortunate," came in a thin, reed-like voice, "I am indeed fortunate in having found so brave a preserver. Honorable sir, from this moment my life is yours."

"Why, you speak perfect English," I said in amazement.

"I have been resident in this country for some time, sir," he replied, "as a student at King's College, until I undertook my present work."

"Well," I said, "we'd better not stand here exchanging polite remarks much longer. There is such a thing as pneumonia, which you would do well to avoid. If you're strong enough, we'll hurry up to the terrace and find my house,

where we'll get you dry and warm. I'm the landlord of the 'Golden Swan' Hotel."

He was a polite fellow, this. He bowed profoundly, and then, as the water dripped from his black and meager form, he said something rather extraordinary.

"I should never have thought it."

I cursed myself. The excitement had made me return to the manner of Piccadilly, and this shrewd observer had seen it in a moment. I said no more, but took him by the arm and yanked him along for one of the fastest miles he had ever done in his life.

I took him to the side door of my pub. Fortunately Ah Sing was descending the stairs to replenish an empty decanter with whisky—my yellow gentlemen used to like it in their tea! I explained what had happened in a few words and my shivering derelict was hurried upstairs to my own bedroom. I don't know what Rolston did to him, though I heard Sliddim—now quite the house cat—directed to run down into the kitchen and confer with Mrs. Abbs.

For my part, I sat in the room behind the bar, listening to the Honest Fool talking with my patrons, and shed my clothes before a blazing fire. A little hot rum, a change, and a dressing-gown, and I was myself again, and smoking a pipe I fell into a sort of dream.

It was a pleasant dream. I suppose the shock of the swim, the race up the terrace to the "Swan," the rum and milk which followed had a soporific, soothing effect. I wasn't exactly asleep, I was pleasantly drowsed, and I had a sort of feeling that something was going to happen. Just

about closing time Rolston glided in—I never saw a European before or since who could so perfectly imitate the ghost walk of the yellow men.

I looked to see that the door to the bar was shut.

"Well, how's our friend?" I asked.

"He's had a big shock, Sir Thomas, but he's all right now. I've rubbed him all over with oil, fed him up with beef-tea and brandy and found him dry clothes."

"He's from the towers, of course?"

As I said this, I saw Bill Rolston's face, beneath its yellow dye, was blazing with excitement.

"Sir Thomas," he said in a whisper, "this is Pu-Yi himself, Mr. Morse's Chinese secretary, a man utterly different from the others we have seen here yet. He's of the Mandarin class, the buttons on his robe are of red coral. In this house, at this moment, we have one of the masters of the Secret City."

I gave a long, low whistle, which—I remember it so well—exactly coincided with the raucous shout of the Honest Fool—"Time, gentlemen, please!"

A thought struck me.

"The other Chinese in the large and small rooms, do they know this man is here?"

"No, Sir Thomas; I am more than glad to say I got him up to your own room when both doors were closed."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's having a little sleep. I promised to call him in an hour or so, when he wishes to pay you his respects."

He listened for a moment.

"The others are going downstairs," he said. "I must be there to see them out, and I have one or two little transactions—"

He felt in a villainous side pocket and I knew as well as possible what it contained, and what would be handed to one or two of the moon-faced gentlemen as they slipped out of the side door on their way home.

Bill came back in some twenty minutes.

"Now," he said, "I'm going upstairs to wake Pu-Yi and bring him down to you. You must remember, Sir Thomas, that I am only a dirty little servant. I am as far beneath a man like Pu-Yi as Sir Thomas Kirby is above Stanley Whistlecraft, so I cannot be present at your interview. My idea was that I should creep into the bar—Stanley will have had his supper and gone to bed—and lie down on the floor with my ear to the bottom of the door, then I can hear everything."

"That's a good idea," I said, for I was beginning to realize what an enormous lot might depend upon this interview. Then I thought of something else.

"Look here, Bill, you must remember this too. I fished the blighter out of the Thames and no doubt he will be thankful in his overdone, Oriental fashion. But to him, a man of the class you say he is, I shall be nothing but a vulgar publican, and I don't see quite what's going to come out of *that!*"

He had slipped the gutta-percha pads out of his cheeks —an operation to which I had grown quite accustomed— and I could see his face as it really was.

"That's occurred to me also," he replied, "but somehow or other I'm sure the fates are on our side to-night."

He arose, turned away for a moment, there was a click and a gasp, and he was the little impassive Oriental again. He glided up to me, put his yellow hand with the long, polished finger nails upon my shoulder, and said in my ear:

"Sir Thomas, he must see Her every day!"

He vanished from the room almost as he spoke, and left me with blood on fire.

I was to see some one who might have spoken with Juanita that very day! and I sat almost trembling with impatience, though issuing a dozen warnings to myself to betray nothing, to keep every sense alert, so that I might turn the interview to my own advantage.

At last there was a knock on the door, Bill opened it and the slim figure of the man I had rescued glided in. They had dried his clothes, he even wore his little skull cap which had apparently stuck to his head while he was in the water, and I had the opportunity of seeing him in the light for the first time.

Instead of the flat, Tartar nose, I saw one boldly aquiline, with large, narrow nostrils. His eyes were almond shaped but lustrous and full of fire. About the lips, which had no trace of sensuality but were beautifully cut, there was a kind of serene pathos—I find it difficult to describe in any other way. The whole face was noble in contour and in expression, though the general impression it gave was one of unutterable sadness. Dress him how you might, meet

him where you would, there was no possibility of mistaking Pu-Yi for anything but a gentleman of high degree.

The door closed and I rose from my seat and held out my hand.

"Well," I said, "this is a bit of orlright, sir, and I'm glad to see you so well recovered. To-morrow morning we'll have the law on them dirty rascals that assaulted you."

I put on the accent thickly—flashed my diamond ring at him, in short—for this might well be a game of touch and go, and I had a deep secret to preserve.

He put his long, thin hand in mine, gripped it, and then suddenly turned it over so that the backs of my fingers were uppermost.

It was an odd thing to do and I wondered what it meant.

"Oh, landlord of the Swan of Gold," he piped, in his curious, flute-like voice, sorting out his words as he went on, "I owe you my unworthy life, which is nothing in itself and which I don't value, save only for a certain opportunity which remains to it, and is a private matter. But I owe my life to your courage and strength and flowering kindness, and I come to put myself in your hands."

Really he was making a damn lot of fuss about nothing!

"Look here," I said, "that's all right. You would have done as much for me. Now let's sit down and have a peg and a chat. I can put you up for the rest of the night, you know, and I shall be awfully glad to do it."

He looked as if he was going to make more speeches, but I cut him short.

"As for putting your life in my hands," I said, "we don't talk like that in England."

He sat down and a faint smile came upon his tired lips.

"And do the public-house keepers in England have hands such as yours are?" he said gently. "Sir, your hands are white, they are also shaped in a certain way, and your nails are not even in mourning for your profession!"

I cursed myself savagely as he mocked me. Bill had pointed out over and over again that I oughtn't to use a nail brush too frequently—it wasn't in the part—but I always forgot it.

To hide my confusion I moved a little table towards him on which was a box of excellent cigarettes. Unfortunately, also on the table was a little pocket edition of Shakespeare with which I used to solace the drab hours.

He picked it up, opened it plump at "Romeo and Juliet" —the play which, for reasons known to you, I most affected at the time—and looked up at me with gentle eyes.

" 'Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona,' " he said.

My brain was working like a mill. I could not make the fellow out. What did he know, what did he suspect? Well, the best thing was to ask him outright.

"You mean?"

He became distressed at once.

"You speak harshly to me, O my preserver. I meant but that I knew at once that you are not born in the position in which I see you. Perhaps you will give me your kind leave to explain. In my native country I am

of high hereditary rank, though I am poor enough and occupy a somewhat menial position here. My honorable name, honorable sir, is Pu-Yi, which will convey nothing to you. During the rebellion of twenty years ago in China, my ancestral house was destroyed and as a child I was rescued and sent to Europe. For many years the peasants of my Province scraped their little earnings together, and a sum sufficient to support me in my studies was sent to me in Paris. I speak the French, Spanish and English languages. I am a Bachelor of Science of the London University, and my one hope and aim in life is, and has been, to acquire sufficient money to return to the tombs of my ancestors on the banks of the Yang-tse-kiang, there to live a quiet life, much resembling that of an English country squire, until I also fade away into the unknown, and become part of the Absolute."

There was something perfectly charming about him. Since he spotted I wasn't a second edition of the Honest Fool, since he had somehow or other divined that I was an educated man, I felt drawn to him. You must remember that for months now the only person I had had to talk to was Bill Rolston. And all the time, he was so occupied in our tortuous campaign that we only met late at night to report progress.

For a moment I quite forgot what this new friend might mean to me, and opened out to him without a thought of further advantage.

I was a fool, no doubt. Afterwards, talking it all over with Pat Moore and Arthur Winstanley, I saw that I ran a

great risk. Anyhow, I reciprocated Pu-Yi's confidence as well as I could.

"I'm awfully glad we've met, even under such unfortunate circumstances. You are quite right. I come of a different class from what the ordinary frequenter of this hotel might suppose, but since you have discovered it I beg you to keep it entirely to yourself. I also have had my misfortunes. Perhaps I also am longing for some ultimate happiness or triumph."

Out of the box he took a cigarette, and his long, delicate fingers played with it.

"Brother," he said, "I understand, and I say again, now that I can say it in a new voice, my life is yours."

Then I began on my own account.

"Tell me," I said, "of yourself. Many of your fellow-countrymen come here—the lower orders—and they're all employed by the millionaire, Gideon Morse, who seems to prefer the men of China to any other. You also, Pu-Yi, are connected with this colossal mystery?"

He didn't answer for a moment, but looked down at the glowing end of his cigarette.

"Yes," he replied, with some constraint, "I am in the service of the honorable Mr. Gideon Mendoza Morse. I am, in fact, his private secretary and through me his instructions are conveyed to the various heads of departments."

"You are fortunate. I suppose that before long you will be able to fulfill your ambitions and retire to China?"

With a quick glance at me he admitted that this was so.

"And yet," I said thoughtfully, "it must be a very trying service, despite that you live in Wonderland, in a City of Enchantment."

Again I caught a swift regard and he leant forward in his chair.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

I hazarded a bold shot.

"Simply because the man is mad," I said.

His bright eyes narrowed to glittering slits.

"You quote gossip of the newspapers," he replied.

"Do I? I happen to know more than the newspapers do."

He rose to his feet, took two steps towards me, and looked down with a twitching face.

"Who *are* you?" he said, and his whole frail frame trembled.

I caught him firmly by the arm and stared into his face —God knows what my own was like.

"I am the one who has been waiting, the one who is waiting, to help—the one who has come to save," I said, and my voice was not my own—it was as if the words were put into my mouth by an outside power.

He wrenched his arm away, gave a little cry, strode to the mantelpiece and bent his head upon his arms. His whole body was shaken with convulsive sobs.

I stood in the middle of the room watching him, hardly daring to breathe, feeling that my heart was swelling until it occupied the whole of my body.

At length he looked up.

"Then I shall be of some use to Her after all," he said. "This is too much honor. The Lily of White Jade—"

He staggered back, his face working terribly, and fell in a huddled heap upon the floor. I was just opening my mouth to call for Rolston when there came a thunderous knocking upon the side door of the house.

I ran into the dimly lit passage and as I did so Rolston flitted out of the bar door and stood beside me.

"I have heard everything," he whispered, "but what, what is this?"

He pointed to the door, and as he did so there was again the thunder of the knocker and the whirr of the electric bell.

Hardly knowing what I did I shot back the bolts at top and bottom, turned the heavy key in its lock and opened the door.

Outside in the moonlight a figure was standing, a man in a heavy fur coat, carrying a suitcase in his left hand.

"What the devil—" I was beginning, when he pushed past me and came into the hall.

Then I saw, with a leap of all my pulses, that it was Lord Arthur Winstanley.

CHAPTER NINE

It was four o'clock in the morning. A bitter wind had risen and was wailing around the "Golden Swan," interspersed with heavy storms of hail which rattled on roof and windows. Outside the tempest shrieked and was accompanied by a vast, humming, harp-like noise as it flung itself against the lattice-work of the towers and vibrated over Richmond like a chorus of giant Æolian harps. Arthur and I sat in the shabby sitting-room, which had been the theater of so much emotion that night, and stared at each other with troubled faces.

There was a little pattering noise, and Bill Rolston came in, closing the door carefully behind him.

"He wants you to go up to him, Sir Thomas. You told me to use my own discretion. Since we carried him up and I gave him the bromides, I haven't left his bedside. I talked to him in his own language, but he wouldn't say a word until I threw off every disguise and told him who I really was and who you were also."

"But, Rolston, you may have spoiled everything!"

He shook his head.

"You don't know what I know. Now that he's aware you are of his own rank, and that I am your lieutenant, his life is absolutely your forfeit. If you were to tell him to commit suicide he would do it at once as the most

natural thing in the world, to preserve his honor. He is your man from this moment, Sir Thomas, just as I am."

"Then I'll go up. Arthur, you don't mind?"

"Mind! I thought I brought a bomb-shell into your house to-night, and so I have too, but to find all this going on simply robs me of speech. Meanwhile, if you will introduce me to this Asiatic gentleman who speaks such excellent English, and whom, from repute I guess to be Mr. William Rolston, I daresay we can amuse ourselves during the remainder of this astonishing night. And," he continued, "if there is such a thing as a ham upon the premises, some thick slices grilled upon this excellent fire, and some cool ale in a pewter—"

I left them to it and went upstairs to my chamber. It was lit with two or three candles in silver holders—I had made the place quite habitable by now—and lying on my bed, covered with an eiderdown, his eyes feverish, his face flushed, lay the Mandarin.

His eyes opened and he smiled. It was the first time I had seen the delicate, melancholy lips light up in a real smile.

"What's that for?" I said, as I sat down by the bedside.

"You are so big, and strong, Prince," he replied, "and large and confident; and your disguise fell from you as you came in and I saw you as you were."

I knelt beside the bed and my breath came thick and fast.

"For God's sake don't play with me," I said, "not that

you are doing that. You have met Her—Miss Morse I mean, my Juanita?"

"Prince, she has deigned to give me her confidence in some degree. I do my work in the wonderful library that Mr. Morse has built. It's a great hall, full of the rarest volumes; and there are long windows from which one can look down upon London and gaze beyond the City to where the wrinkled sea beats around the coast. And, day by day, in her loneliness, the Fairest of Maidens has come to this high place and taken a book of poems, sat in the embrasure, and stared down at the world below."

He raised a thin hand and held it upright. It was so transparent that the light of a candle behind turned it to blood red.

"Let my presumptuous desires be forever silent," he chanted. "'East is east and west is west,' and I erred gravely. But, worship is worship, and worship is sacrifice."

I could hardly speak, my voice was hoarse, his words had given me such a picture of Juanita up there in the clouds.

"Prince—"

"I am not a Prince, I only have a very ordinary title. If you know England, you understand what a baronet is."

"I know England. Prince, your Princess is waiting for you and sighing out her heart that you have not come to her."

I leapt to my feet and swore a great oath that made the attic room ring.

"*You mean?*" I shouted.

"Prince, the Lily of all the lilies, the Rose of all the roses, alone, distraught, another Ophelia—no, say rather Juliet with her nurse—has honored me with the story of her love. She never told me whom she longed for, but I knew that it was some one down in the world."

I staggered out a question.

"It is my humble adoration for her which has sharpened all my wits," he answered. "It seemed an accident—though the gods designed it without doubt—that made you save my life to-night, but now I know you are the lover of the Lily. And I am the servant—the happy messenger—of you both."

"You can take a letter from me to her?"

"Indeed, yes."

"My friend, tell me, tell me all about her. Is she happy?—no, I know she cannot be that—but—"

He lifted himself up in the bed, and there was something priest-like in his attitude as he folded his thin hands upon his breast and spoke.

"Two thousand feet above London there is a Palace of all delights. Immeasurable wealth, the genius of great artists have been combined to make a City of Enchantment. And in every garden with its plashing fountains, in its halls of pictures and delights, upon its aerial towers, down its gilded galleries, lurking at the banquet, mingling with the music, great shapes of terror squeak and gibber like the ghosts Shakespeare speaks of in ancient Rome."

"Morse?"

"There is a noble intellect overdone and dissolved in terror. In all other respects sane as you or I, my savior and benefactor, Gideon Morse is a maniac whose one sole idea is to preserve himself and his daughter from some horror, some vengeance which surely cannot threaten him."

Twice, thrice I strode the attic.

Then at last I stopped.

"Will you help me now, Pu-Yi, will you take a letter from me, will you help me to meet Her, and soon?"

He bowed his head for answer, and then, as he looked up again his face was suffused with a sort of bright eagerness that touched me to the heart.

"I am yours," he said.

"Then quickly, and soon, Pu-Yi, for you are only half informed. Gideon Morse may be driven mad by fear, no doubt he is. But it is *not* an imaginary fear. It is a thing so sinister, so real and terrible, that I cannot tell you of it now. I am too exhausted by the events of this night. I will say only this, that within the last hour a faithful friend of mine has returned from the other side of the world and brings me ominous news."

. . . . . .

I believe that Pu-Yi, whose movements were, of course, not restricted like those of the lower officials, returned to the towers in the early morning. As for me, I caught a workmen's train from Richmond station, slunk in an early taxi to Piccadilly with Arthur Winstanley, and slipped into lavender-clean sheets and silence till past noon, when Captain Patrick Moore arrived to an early lunch. Dressed

again in proper clothes, with dear old Preston fussing about me with tears in his eyes, I felt a thousand times more confident than before. Old Pat had to be informed of everything, and as a preliminary I told him my whole story, from the starting-point of the "Golden Swan."

"And now," I said, "here's Arthur, who has traveled thousands of miles and who has come back with information that fits in absolutely with everything else. He gave me an epitome last night, under strange and fantastic circumstances. Now then, Arthur, let's have it all clearly, and then we shall know where we are."

Arthur, whose face was white and strained, began at once.

"I went straight to Rio," he said, "and of course I took care that I was accredited to our Legation. As a matter of fact the Minister to the Brazilian Government is my cousin. The news about the towers was all over Brazil. Everybody there knows Gideon Mendoza Morse. He's been by a long way the most picturesque figure in South America during the last twenty years. He has been President of the Republic. Of course, I had the freshest news. My mother had given a party to introduce Juanita to London society. I had danced with her. I had talked to her father—I was the young English society man who brought authentic news. I told all I knew, and a good bit more, and I sucked in information like a vacuum-cleaner. I learnt a tremendous lot as to the sources of Morse's enormous wealth. I was glad to find that there were no allegations against him of any trust methods, any financial tricks. He had got rich like one of the old patriarchs, simply by

shrewdness and long accumulation and rising values. But I had to go a good deal farther back than this, I had to dive into obscure politics of South America, and then—it was almost like a punch on the jaw—I stumbled against the Santa Hermandad."

Pat Moore and I cried out simultaneously.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Our League?"

"It's sheer coincidence," he answered. "I hope it's not a bad omen. During the time when the last Emperor of Brazil, Pedro II, was reigning, it was seen by all his supporters, both in Brazil and in Spain, that his power was waning and a crash was sure to come. In order to preserve the Principle of the Monarchy, a powerful Secret Society was started, under the name of the Holy Brotherhood or Santa Hermandad. Gideon Morse, then a young and very influential man, became a member of this Society. But, after the Emperor was deposed, and a Republic declared, Morse threw in his lot with the new régime. I have gathered that he did so out of pure patriotism; he realized that a Republic was the best thing for his country, and had no personal ax to grind whatever. He prospered exceedingly. As you know he has, in his time, been President of the Republica dos Estados Unidos de Brazil, and has contributed more to the success of the country than any other man living."

"Fascinatin' study, history," said Captain Moore, "for those that like it. Personally, I am no bookworm; cut the cackle, Arthur, old bean, and come to the 'osses."

"Peace, fool!" said Arthur, "if you can't understand what I say, Tom will explain to you later, though I'll be as short as I jolly-well can."

He turned to me.

"When this Secret Society failed, Tom—the Hermandad, I mean—it wasn't dissolved. It was agreed by the Inner Circle that it was only suspended. But as the years went by, nearly all the prominent members died, and the Republic became an assured thing. But a few years ago the Society was revived, not with any real hope of putting an Emperor on the throne again but as a means to terrorism and blackmail. All the most lawless elements of Spanish South America became affiliated into a new and sinister confederation. You've heard of the power of the Camorra in Italy—well, the Hermandad in Brazil is like that at the present time. It has ramifications everywhere, the police are becoming powerless to cope with it, and a secret reign of terror goes on at this hour.

"These people have made a dead shot for Gideon Morse. He has defied them for a long time, but their power has grown and grown. I understand that two years ago the Hermandad fished out of obscurity an old Spanish nobleman, the Marquis da Silva, who was one of the original, chivalrous monarchists. He was about the only surviving member of the old Fraternity, and they got him to produce its constitutions. He came upon the scene some two years ago and Morse was given just that time to fall in with the plans of the modern Society, or be assassinated together with his daughter."

He stopped, and it was dear old Pat Moore who shouted with comprehension.

"Why, now," he bellowed, "sure and I see it all. That's why he built the Tower of Babel and went to live on the top, and drag his daughter with him—so that these Sinn Feiners should not get at 'm."

"Yes, Pat, you've seen through it at a glance," said Arthur, with a private grin to me.

Pat was tremendously bucked up at the thought that he had solved a problem which had been puzzling both of us.

"All the same," he said, "the place is too well guarded for any Spanish murderer to get up. Besides, Tom here is makin' all his arrangements and he'll have Miss Juanita out of it in no time."

"The circumstances," Arthur went on calmly, "are perfectly well known to a few people at the head of the Government in Brazil. I had a long and intimate conversation with Don Francisco Torromé, Minister of Police to the Republic. He told me that the Hermandad is intensely revengeful, wicked, and unscrupulous. Moreover, it's rich; and money wouldn't be allowed to stand in the way of getting at Morse. What is lacking is energy. These people make the most complete and fiendish plans, they dream the most fantastic and devilish dreams, and then they say 'Manana'—which means, 'It will do very well to-morrow'—and go to sleep in the sun."

"Then after all, Morse is in no danger!" I cried, immensely relieved. "You said the danger was real, but you spoke figuratively."

"Sorry, old chap, not a bit of it. There's some one on the track with energy enough to pull the lid off the infernal regions if necessary. In short, the Hermandad have engaged the services of an international scoundrel of the highest intellectual powers, a man without remorse, an artist in crime—I should say, and most Chiefs of Police in the kingdoms of the world would agree with me—the most dangerous ruffian at large. You've seen him, Tom, I pointed him out to you at a little Soho restaurant where we dined once together. His name is Mark Antony Midwinter, and *he traveled from Brazil, together with a friend, by the same boat that I did.*"

"Then he must be in London now!" said Pat Moore, with the air of announcing another great discovery.

"But look here!" I cried. "I told you, before you sailed for South America, I told you what I saw at the Ritz Hotel that night. It was the very same man, Mark Antony Midwinter, as you call him, running like a hare from old Morse, who was shooting fireworks round him with a smile on his face. *That's* not the man you think he is. He may be a devil, but that night he was a devil of a funk."

"Wait a bit, my son," said Arthur. "I have thought about that incident rather carefully. Remember that Morse was given a certain time in which to come in line and join the Hermandad. From what I have heard of the punctilious, senile Marquis da Silva, he wouldn't have allowed the campaign against Morse to be started a moment before the time of immunity was up. Might not Midwinter at that time, quite ignorant that the towers were being built as

a refuge for Morse, have tried to go behind his own employers and offer to betray them, and to drop the whole business for a million or so? From what I know of the man's career I should think it extremely probable."

I whistled. Arthur seemed to have penetrated to the center of that night's mystery. There was nothing more likely. I could imagine the whole scene, the panther man laying his cards on the table and offering to save Morse and Juanita from certain death—Morse, already half maddened by what hung over him, chuckling in the knowledge that he had built an impregnable refuge, dismissing the scoundrel with utter firmness and contempt.

"I believe you've hit it, Arthur," I said. "It fits in like the last bit of a jig-saw puzzle."

"I'm pretty sure myself, but even now you don't know all. Quite early in his life, when Midwinter—he's the last of the Staffordshire Midwinters, an ancient and famous family—was expelled from Harrow, he went out to South America. Morse was at that time in the wilds of Goyaz, where he was developing his mines. There was a futile attempt to kidnap the child, Juanita, who was then about two years old, and Midwinter was in it. The young gentleman, I understand, was caught. Morse was then, as doubtless he is now, a man of a grim and terrible humor. He took young Midwinter and treated him with every possible contemptuous indignity. They say his head was shaved; he was birched like a schoolboy by Morse's peons; he was branded, tarred and feathered, and turned contemptuously adrift. The fellow came back to Europe, married a celebrated

actress in Paris, who is now dead, and has been, as I say, one of the most successful uncaught members of the higher criminal circles that ever was. He made an attempt at the Ritz, swallowing his hatred. It failed. His employers in Brazil know nothing of it. He is here in London—as Pat so wonderfully discovered—supplied with unlimited money, burning with a hatred of which a decent man can have no conception, and confronted with his last chance in the world."

As he said this, Arthur got up, bit his lip savagely and left the room.

It was about two-thirty in the afternoon.

Though he closed the door after him, I heard voices in the corridor, and the door reopened an inch or two as if some one was holding it before coming in.

"You are not well, my lord?"

"Oh, I'm all right, Preston; just feeling a little faint, that's all. Sorry to nearly have barged into you; I'll go and lie down for half an hour."

The door opened and Preston came in with a telegram.

I opened it immediately and felt three or four flimsy sheets of Government paper in my hand.

The telegram was in the special cipher of the *Evening Special,* and was from Rolston.

"The tower top is connected with Richmond telephone exchange by private wire. I have been rung up and in long conversation with Pu-Yi. Early in the evening you will receive a letter from certain lady. Owing to certain com-

plication of circumstances your attempt at storming the tower and seeing lady must be carried out to-night. Our friend is making all possible arrangements to this end and urgently begs you to be prepared. He implicitly urges me to warn you the attempt is not without grave danger. Please return to 'Swan' at once. There is much to be arranged, and at lunch time two strange-looking customers were in the bar whose appearance I didn't like at all. Also Sliddim thinks he recognized one of them as an exceedingly dangerous person."

For to-night! At last the patient months of waiting were over and it had all narrowed down to this. To-night I should win or lose all that made life worth living; and the fast taxi that took me back to Richmond within twenty minutes of receiving the telegram, carried a man singing.

CHAPTER TEN

THE wind was getting up on Richmond Hill and masses of cloud were scudding from the South and obscuring the light of the moon, when at about half-past nine a small, well-appointed motor coupé drew up in front of the great gate at the tower inclosure.

The small closed-in car was painted dead black, the man who drove it was in livery, and a professional-looking person in a fur coat stepped out and pressed the electric button of a small door in the wall by the side of the huge main gates. In his hand he had a little black bag.

In a moment the door opened a few inches and a large, saffron-colored, intelligent face could be seen in the aperture.

"The doctor!" said the gentleman from the coupé. The door opened at once to admit him.

He turned and spoke to the chauffeur.

"As I cannot tell you how long I shall be, Williams," he said, "you had better go back to the surgery and wait there. I have no doubt I can telephone when I require you."

The man touched his cap and drove off, and the doctor found himself in a vaulted passage, to the right of which was a brightly lit room. Standing in the passage and bowing was a gigantic Chinaman, Kwang-su, the keeper of the gate, in a quilted black robe lined with fur. The man bowed

low, and a second Chinaman came out of the room, a thin ascetic-looking person.

"Ah, Dr. Thomas!" he said, "we've been expecting you. I am secretary to Mr. Morse. Perhaps you will come this way."

He led the doctor down the passage, unlocked a further door and the two men emerged into the grounds, proceeding down a wide, graveled road, bordered by strips of lawn and lit at intervals with electric standards. In the distance there were ranges of lit buildings with figures flitting backwards and forwards before the orange oblongs of doors and windows. In another quarter rose the lighted dome of the great Power House from which the low hum of dynamos and the steady throb of engines could be faintly heard in pauses of the gale. It was exactly like standing at night in the center of some great exhibition grounds, save that straight ahead, overshadowing everything and covering an immense area of ground, were the bases of the three great towers, a nightmare of fantastic steel tracery such as no man's eye had beheld before in the history of the world.

"So far, so good," said Pu-Yi with a sigh of relief. "That was excellently managed, the motor-car was quite in keeping. Your wonderful little friend who speaks my language so well is already in the compound with some of the men. He will await here to take any orders that may be necessary."

I was trembling with excitement and could hardly reply.

Here I was at last, passed into the Forbidden City with the greatest ease.

"We will walk slowly towards tower number three, which

is the one we shall ascend," said my companion, "and I will explain the situation to you. On the tower top I have supreme authority, except for one man, and that's the Irish-American, Boss Mulligan. This worthy is much addicted to the use of hot and rebellious liquors, and is generally more or less intoxicated about this time, though he is more alert and ferocious than when sober. To-night I have taken the opportunity to put a little something in his bottle, a little something from China, which will not be detected, and which will by now have sent him into a profound, drugged slumber. I then telephoned all down the tower to the lift men on the various stages, and also to Kwang there, that a doctor was to be expected and that I would come down to meet him and conduct him to Mr. Morse."

"Excellent!" I said, "and now—?"

"Now we are going straight up to the very top. Every one will see us but no one will think anything strange. Moreover, and this is a fact in our favor, when Mulligan awakes no one will be able to tell him of the incident even if they suspected anything, for few, if any, of the tower men speak more than a few rudimentary words of English, and I am the intermediary between them and their master. This was specially arranged by Mr. Morse so that none of them could get into communication with Europeans. The fact is greatly in our favor."

I pressed my hand to a pocket over my heart, where lay a little note which had been mysteriously conveyed to me early in the evening—a little agitated note bidding me come at all costs—and passed on in silence until we came under

the gloomy shadows of the mighty girders and columns which sprang up from an expanse of smooth concrete which seemed to stretch as far as eye could reach.

We changed our lift at each stage; and I could have wished that it was day or the night was finer, for the experience is wonderful when one undergoes it for the first time.

"We shall ascend by one of the small rapid lifts built for four or five persons only, and not the large and more cumbrous machines. Even so, you must remember, Doctor"—he chuckled as he called me that—"we have nearly half a mile to go."

On and on we went, amid this lifeless forest of steel with its smooth concrete and shining electric-lamps, until at last we approached a small, illuminated pavilion, where two silent celestials awaited us. We stepped into the lift, the door was closed, a bell rang and we began to move upwards. I sat down on a plush-covered seat and didn't attempt to look out of the frosted windows on either side until at length, after what seemed an interminable time, we stopped with a little jerk. Pu-Yi opened the door and led me down on to a platform.

"We are now," he said, "on the first stage—just fifty feet higher than the golden cross on the top of Saint Paul's. If you will come up this slant—see! here's the next lift."

I followed him along a steel platform for some twenty or thirty yards, the wind whistling all around. On looking to the right I saw nothing but a black void, at the bottom of which, far, far below, was the yellow glow of

Richmond town. On looking to the left I stopped for a moment and stared, unable to believe my eyes. As I live, there was an immense lake there, surrounded by rushes that sang and swished in the wind, with a boat-house, and a little landing-stage!

Then, with a clang of wings and a chorus of shrill quacks, a gaggle of wild duck got up and sped away into the dark.

"Yes," said Pu-Yi, "that's the lake. There are many variety of water fowl fed there, who make it their home. On a quiet afternoon, walking round the margin, or in a canoe, one can feel ten thousand miles away from London. But that's nothing to what you will see if circumstances permit."

I have but a dim recollection of the second stage, which was only a stage in the particular tower we were mounting, and did not extend between the three as the lower and two upper ones did, forming the immense plateaus of which the lake was one and the City in the clouds itself another.

It was when we had slowed down, and even in the dark lift, that I began to have a curious sensation of an immense immeasurable height, and Pu-Yi gave me a warning look as who would say, "Now, get ready, the adventure really begins."

We stopped, the door slid back and immediately we were in a blaze of light. We were no longer out of doors. The lift had come up through the floor of a large room. It was divided into two portions by polished steel bars extending from ceiling to floor. A cat could not have squeezed through. On our side, the lift side, the floor was covered

with matting but there was no furniture at all. Beyond the bars were a Turkey carpet, several armchairs, a mahogany table with bottles, siphons, newspapers, and a large, automatic pistol. An electric fire burned cheerily in one corner and at right angles to it was a couch. Upon this couch, purple-faced and snoring like a bull, lay Mulligan, huge, relaxed, helpless.

"Good heavens!" I whispered. "Gideon Morse is safe enough here."

"In ten seconds," Pu-Yi whispered, "by pressing that bell button, Mulligan could have the room full of armed guards, and as you see, this steel fence is unpassable without the key. There are only three keys, of which I have one."

He produced it as he spoke, inserting it in a gleaming, complicated lock, slid back a portion of the steel-work, and we stepped into the guard-room.

"We are now," said my guide, "on the platform immediately under that on which the City rests, and about a hundred feet below it. This platform is entirely occupied by this guard-room, a range of store and dwelling houses, the elaborate electric installation, power for which is supplied from below, Turkish baths, a swimming bath, and so forth. Please follow me."

With a glance of repulsion at the drugged giant on the couch I went after Pu-Yi, through a door on the opposite side of the room, and down a long corridor with windows on one side and arched recesses on the other. At the end of this we came out again into the open air, that is to say that we were shielded by walls and buildings, walking as

it were in a sleeping town upon streets paved with wood blocks, while instead of the vault of heaven above, about the height of a tallish church tower were the great beams and girders which supported the City itself, and from which, at regular intervals, hung arc lamps which threw a blue and stilly radiance upon the streets and roofs of the buildings.

It was colossal, amazing, this great colony in the sky. Now and then we heard voices, the rattle of dice thrown upon a board, and the wailing music of Chinese violins. Two or three times silent figures passed us with a low bow, and without a glimmer of curiosity in their impassive faces, until at length we came to a long row of lift doors, with an inscription above each one, and in the center, dividing them into sections, a large, vaulted stairway mounting upwards till it was lost to sight. It was lined with white tiles like a subway in some great railway terminus.

Pu-Yi unlocked the door of a small lift. We got into it, it rushed up for a few seconds and then we came out of a small white kiosk upon a scene so wonderful, so enchanted that I forgot all else for a second, caught hold of my conductor's thin arm and gave a cry of admiration and wonder. A mass of clouds had just raced before the moon, leaving it free to shed its light until another should envelop it.

The pure radiance, unspoiled by smoke, mist, or the miasma which hangs above the roofs of earthly cities, poured down in floods of light upon a vast quadrangle of buildings, white as snow and with roofs that seemed of gold.

I had the impression of immensity, though magnified a

dozen times, that the great quadrangle of Christ Church, Oxford, or the court of Trinity, Cambridge, give to one who sees them for the first time. But that impression was only fleeting. These buildings seemed to obey no architectural law. They were tossed up like foam in the upper air, marvelous, fantastic, beautiful beyond words.

We hurried along by the side of a great green lawn which might have been a century growing, past bronze dragons supporting fountain basins, down an arcade, where the broad leaves of palms clicked together and there was a scent of roses, until we hurried through a little postern door and up some steps and came out in what Pu-Yi whispered was the library.

Wonder upon wonders! My brain reeled as we stepped out of the door in the wall into a great Gothic room with groined roof of stone, an oriel window at one end, and thousands upon thousands of books in the embayed shelves of ancient oak. It was exactly like the library of some great college or castle; one expected to see learned men in gowns and hoods moving slowly from shelf to shelf, or writing at this or that table.

"But, but," I stammered, "this might have been here for seven hundred years!" and indeed there was all the deep scholastic charm and dignity of one of the great libraries of the past.

For answer he turned to me, and I saw that his thin hand clutched at his heart.

"It's all illusion," he whispered, "all cunning and wonderful illusion. The walls of this place are not of ancient stone.

They are plates of toughened steel. The old oak was made yesterday at great expense. 'Tis all a picture in a dream."

I saw that he was powerfully affected for a moment, but for just that moment I did not understand why.

"But the books!" I cried, looking round me in amazement—"surely the books—?"

"Ah, yes," he sighed, "they are the collection of Mr. Gideon Morse, which is second to very few in the world. They were all brought over from Rio nearly two years ago. We cannot compete with the British Museum, or some of the great American collectors in certain ways, but there are treasures here—"

We had by now walked half-way up the great hall. He stopped, went to part of the wall covered with books, withdrew one, turned a little handle which its absence revealed, and a whole section of the shelves swung outwards.

"In here, please," said Pu-Yi, "this is a little room where I sometimes do secretarial work. At any rate it is hidden, and you will be quite safe here while I go to the Señorita and tell her that you await her."

The door clicked. I sat down on a low couch and waited.

The experiences of the night had been so strange, the intense longing of months seemed now so near fruition, that every artery in my body pulsed and drummed, and it was only by a tremendous effort of will that I sat down and forced myself to think.

Here I was, at her own invitation, to rescue my love. As my mind began to work I saw that I must be guided in my course of action by what she told me. Juanita ob-

viously thought that her father's aberration was a form of madness without foundation. She did not know what I had discovered. If she did she might realize that her father was possibly not so mad as she imagined. For myself, after this space of time, I can say that I was very seriously disturbed by Arthur Winstanley's revelations in regard to the unspeakable Midwinter and the news that he was now in England. Perhaps you will remember that in Bill Rolston's telegram to me he hinted at some suspicious strangers having been seen in the private bar of the "Golden Swan." One of them, I had ascertained, answered to the description of Midwinter in every detail, and the two men were seen by Sliddim to drive away through Richmond Park in a large, private car.

Certainly I must tell Juanita something of this and help her to warn her father, perhaps . . .

And then I remembered the elaborate precautions of my ascent, the literal impossibility of any stranger or strangers ever getting to where I was, and I breathed again.

The place—one couldn't call it a room—in which I sat, was simply a little sexagonal nook or retreat, masked from the great library by its great door of books. Three of the panels which went from the floor to the vaulted ceiling were of dead black silk. The other three were of Chinese embroidery, stiff, with raised gold, and gems, which I realized must be from the choicest examples of their kind in the world. Still, I wasn't interested in dragons of tarnished gold, with opal eyes, ivory teeth, and scales of lapislazuli. I was getting restive when the black panel, which was the

back of the entrance door, swung towards me, and I saw Juanita.

She was dressed in black, a sort of tea-gown I suppose you'd call it, though round her shoulders and falling on each side of her slim form was a cloak of heavy sable.

In her blue-black hair—oh, my dear, how true you were then to the fashions of the south, and how true you are to-day—there was a glowing, crimson rose.

We stood and looked at each other, in this tiny room, for I suppose two or three seconds.

What Juanita felt she told me afterwards, and it isn't part of this narrative.

What I felt was awe, sheer, impersonal awe, as I realized that I had surmounted incredible difficulties, endured ages of longing, plotting, planning, and now stood alone in front of the most Beautiful Girl in the World.

I saw her as that. I remembered the night at Lady Brentford's when the league was formed.

And then, thank Heaven, for in another second everything might have been quite spoiled, I remembered that she was just my Juanita, who had sent for me, and I took her in my arms and, and . . .

. . . . . .

We sat hand in hand upon the odd little Chinese couch.

"Now look here, darling," I said, "you've told me all about your Governor. How he says that you must live up here in this extraordinary place and never go into the world again. You think him mad, and yet, d'you know, I don't."

"But, my heart—?"

"I've got to tell you, dearest, that he has more reason than you think."

She shrugged her shoulders—it was about the most graceful thing I had ever seen in my life.

"But to tell me that I am to be a nun because, if I were to go back into the world, my life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase. *Caro!* It is madness! It cannot be anything else."

I didn't quite know how to tell her, and I was considering, when she went on:

"It is getting dreadful. Father cannot sleep, he prowls about this nightmare of a place all the night long."

"Sweetheart," I said, "I've been making all sorts of inquiries and I've found out that your Governor is really in serious danger of assassination—or was until he built this place, to which I think the devil could hardly penetrate without an invitation. Don't think your father a coward. Remember what we saw that night in the Ritz Hotel, when I was just about to tell you that I adored you. No, I'd lay long odds, Juanita darling, that Mr. Morse is more afraid for you than for himself. And there I'll back him up every time."

She laughed, and her laughter was like water falling into water in paradise!

"I have you," she said; "I have father—what do I care?"

"Quite so," I replied. "I think you take a very sensible view of it. The obvious thing to do is to relieve your father by coming with me to-night, while the coast is clear. Lady Brentford is in town. She will be delighted to receive you.

Once out of the place, we can be free within an hour. To-morrow morning I can get a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury and we can be married.

"Once that happens, I'll defy all the Santa Hermandads, and all the Mark Antony Midwinters in the world, to hurt you. And as for Mr. Morse, we'll protect him too, in a far more sensible way than—"

I suppose I had been holding her rather tightly. At any rate she broke away and stood up in the center of the little room. The brightness of her face was clouded with thought.

I had not risen and she stared down at me with great, smoldering eyes.

"So it is true!" she said, nodding her head, "it is true, father and I are in peril, after all! Names escaped you just now, I think I have heard one of them before—"

She passed her hand over her brow, like some one awaking from sleep, and I watched her, fascinated.

Oh, how lovely she was at that moment, my dear, my perfect dear!

"But, *caro, of course* I cannot run away with you and be married. *I must* stay with father, cannot you see that?"

Well, of course I did, there were no two words about it. "Very well," I answered, "Little Lady of my heart, I'll stick by the old chap too. I've crept up here in a sort of underhand way, but not for underhand reasons. After all, I've just as much right to love you as anybody else in this world."

I took her by her sweet hands and I laughed in her face.

"I'm not the Duke of Perth," I said, "but, but, Juanita—?"

There came a little knocking at the door.

Juanita swirled round, flung up her arm—I saw her sweet face glowing for an instant—and then she seemed to whirl away like an autumn leaf.

The only thing I could possibly do was to light a cigarette.

Juanita, having met me, having delivered her ultimatum, having turned me into a jelly, flitted away quite oblivious of the fact that I was a burglar, an intruder into what was probably the most guarded and secret place in Europe at that moment.

My heart sang high music, and that was well. But at the same time I recognized that I was in the deuce of a mess and had planned out no course of action at all.

I prayed, almost audibly, for Pu-Yi.

But nobody came. There I was in the sexagonal room, with the gold dragons with their jeweled eyes leering at me.

A dull anger welled up within me. On every side, mentally as well as physically, I seemed baffled, hemmed in. I determined, at any risk to myself, to get out into the library. I took two steps towards the door through which Juanita had gone, when I heard a sharp snap just behind me.

I whipped round, clutching the only weapon I had—which was a brass knuckle-duster in the side pocket of my coat, and then I stood absolutely still.

One of the dragon panels had rolled up like a theater

curtain, and standing in what appeared to be the end of a passage, was the great brute Mulligan, with a Winchester rifle at his shoulder, covering me.

As a man does in the presence of imminent danger, I swerved out of the line of the deadly barrel.

As I did so—click! A second panel disappeared, and I was confronted by Gideon Morse, his hands in the pockets of his dinner jacket, his mouth faintly smiling, his eyes inscrutable.

Imagine it! let the picture appear to you of the fool, Thomas Kirby, trapped like a rat!

Once, twice I swallowed in my throat, and I swear it wasn't from fear but only from an enormous, immeasurable disgust.

I turned to Morse.

"You've been listening," I said, "you and your servant here."

"I have been listening, Sir Thomas Kirby, that's true. I have every right to. When a man breaks into my house without my knowledge and makes clandestine love to my daughter, he's not the person to accuse one of eavesdropping. As for my servant there, you do me an injustice, which I find harder to forgive than anything, when you suggest that I allowed him to overhear what passed in this room just now. He was not at his post until Juanita had been gone from here some seconds. Mulligan, you can go now. Sir Thomas, please come with me into the library."

There was something so magnetic about this strange

and compelling personality that I followed him without a word.

"Then you knew," I asked in a husky voice, "you knew all the time?"

He smiled.

"Yes," he said, "I arranged a little comedy. The faithful Mulligan was not drugged at all, and I did everything to facilitate your entrance."

"Then that treacherous cur, Pu-Yi, was playing with me the whole time! And yet I could have sworn that he was genuine. When I meet him—"

"You will shake hands with him if you are a wise man. Pu-Yi was absolutely genuine, but he, in common with my daughter, knew nothing of the truth until you told it him. He had believed me a madman. Then he understood not only the peril in which I was, and am, but also that of my daughter. Do you think, Kirby, that I should have built these towers, let imagination transcend itself, made myself the cynosure of Europe, unless I was sure of what I was doing? Now, alas, you've told Juanita, and brought terror into her life as well as mine."

"Sir," I said, "her relief is greater than any fear. I'll answer for that."

I faced him fair and square.

"God knows," I said, "I'm not worth a single glance of her sweet eyes, but somehow or other she loves me, though she wouldn't fly with me when I suggested it."

"She has some decent feeling left," he answered, with a dry chuckle. "Well, I overheard everything that passed in

that little room and I must say I rather appreciate the way in which you behaved. You are a rapid thinker, Sir Thomas. What suggests itself to you as the next move in our relations?"

"Quite obvious, sir. You give your consent to my engagement with your daughter. You please her, you bind me to your interests by hoops of steel—though as a matter of fact I'm bound already—and you add a not invaluable auxiliary to your staff."

"Very well," he said, perfectly calmly, and held out his hand. "Now come and have some supper and tell me all you know."

Then that astonishing man thrust his arm through mine and led me down the great library.

"What a marvelous intellect that fellow Pu-Yi has," he said confidentially. "He saw the situation in all its bearings, from all sides at once, and made an instant decision. I'll tell you now, Kirby, that he actually predicted every detail of what has just come to pass. He told me that he owed you his life and was perfectly ready to die for you, as of course for me and my daughter, but that it had occurred to him that his living for all three of us might be by far the wisest attitude to adopt under the circumstances. I quite agree with him."

Then again came the little dry, strange chuckle.

"But no more peddling poppy-juice to my Chinese, my boy. It plays the devil with their nerves in the end!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Morse and I sat at supper in a room which differed in no way from the ordinary study of a country gentleman. Except for the very slightest suggestion rather than sensation of vibration, which my host explained was the drag of the City on the three great towers which perpetually oscillated out of the perpendicular, and so insured the safety of the vast elastic structure, there was nothing to indicate that we were two thousand two hundred feet up in the air.

Our meal was of the simplest, and during it I told Morse, without reservation, all that I had heard from Arthur Winstanley.

"He has the outline very correctly. I'll fill it in later. How long has Lord Arthur been in London?"

"About five days, I believe."

"Time for many preparations to be made if they're going to strike quickly," he said, more to himself than to me, drumming his fingers on the tablecloth.

Then he looked up.

"And these two men who were seen to-day in the bar of your public house?"

"One, sir, was undoubtedly Midwinter. My very sharp-witted informant describes the other man as a swarthy per-

son of just over middle height and apparently of great personal strength. He was bearded, sallow-faced, and had somewhat the appearance of a half-caste."

"Zorilla y Toro, as I expected," said Morse. "Zorilla the Bull, as he is known in half the Republics of South America."

"No doubt," I remarked, "a formidable pair of ruffians, but remember that I saw you deal with one of them at any rate, that night at the Ritz Hotel. The way he legged it out of the drawing-room wouldn't have inspired me with any particular fear of him."

Morse struck the table with his hand.

"I wish I'd sent a bullet through his heart instead of playing fancy fireworks round him. But I feared London and your colossal law and order. It's perfectly true, he didn't influence me in the least on that night. He came to sell his employers, to sell the Hermandad for a hundred thousand pounds."

"It would have been cheaper than this." I waved my hand to indicate the expensive crow's-nest of my future father-in-law.

Morse laughed.

"It wouldn't have made the least difference," he said. "The man couldn't hurt me at the time because he had to obey the orders of the villainous Society at his back. The old Marquis da Silva, who is simply a tool in their hands, insisted that I was not to be even interfered with in any way until the two years of grace from my first warning were up. Though their object was to get hold of half my

fortune, and Midwinter's to revenge himself personally upon me, the Society and he didn't dare do anything until the moment struck. There were too many political issues still involved.

"That's why I made Mr. Mark Antony Midwinter dance out of the Ritz Hotel on that night."

"It's what Arthur Winstanley said."

"That young man will go far. Now, Kirby, I think you understand everything, and you've got to throw in your lot with Juanita and me, for a time at any rate, and never say you didn't know what you were up against."

I took a glass of claret and lit a cigarette.

"I understand the *facts,* as you say, but I don't understand you. Allowing for all your natural and deep anxiety about Juanita, I simply fail to understand why you regard this Midwinter and his companion or companions with such apprehension. Surely you could have the man locked up to-morrow, knowing what you know about him."

Morse sighed, with a sort of gentle patience.

"A few more facts," he said; "and do reflect that it's most improbable that a man of my intelligence and resources should act as he has done without being sure of what he was doing. In the first place, I've had Midwinter watched by the most famous detectives in America, watched for years. None of these people have ever been able quite to bowl him out—a simile from your English game of cricket. But three of the most trusted and acute agents have lost their lives during these investigations, and lost them in a singularly unpleasant manner."

He sighed again, this time wearily, and I saw that his face was old and without interest or hope.

"What on earth is the use," he went on, "of telling you all I know about this man? Sir"—his voice began to rise, and a light came into the dark depths of his eyes—"Sir, if I saw his corpse before me now, I wouldn't believe him dead or his power for evil ended until I had hacked his head from his shoulders with my own hand! You cannot, I say you simply cannot realize or understand the fiendish ingenuity, persistence, and icy cruelty of this being, for I will not insult our common humanity by calling it a man. If Juanita ever gets into his hands—"

His mouth, his whole face, was working, I thought he was going to have a fit, and truth to tell, something icy began to congeal around my own heart.

"Calm yourself, sir," I said, as authoritatively as I could. "Juanita is doubly safe now that I am here, and as for Midwinter, he'll never approach us here. It's beyond the wit of mortal man, and, meanwhile, I'll see that he's apprehended and removed from all power of doing harm. I am only a young man, Mr. Morse, but I'm rather a power in the land. You see I have an important newspaper at my back, and as for you, who have already made the Government feed out of your hand in the matter of these towers, you should have gone to the Home Secretary in the first instance. At any rate, we'll go together, and believe me, we shall be listened to."

"I thank you, my dear boy," he replied with an effort, "but there is such a thing as Fate, and Fate has whispered

in my ear. I am not naturally a superstitious man, but during a life spent in strange places among strange people I have learnt to be very wary of a material interpretation of life. But this I will say, whatever I feel about myself, however my precautions might fail, I believe that my dear daughter will win to safety in the end, that the power of evil will be overcome, and that you will be her savior."

I could have sworn, as he shook hands and bade me good-night, there was a tear in the great man's eye, and I wondered how long it was since any one had seen that in this master of millions and of men.

A picturesque young Chinaman, a valet in flowing Oriental robes, who spoke English with the most appalling cockney accent you ever heard in your life, conducted me to a charming bedroom, provided me with everything necessary, and in five minutes I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A really full day, wasn't it?

. . . . . .

When I woke up the next morning my room was flooded with sunshine from a dome in the ceiling.

Seated upon my bed, and balancing a cup of tea, was Master Bill Rolston. His hair was restored to its natural red, his nose normal, and his high cheek-bones were gone. On each side of his chubby face his transparent ears stood out at right angles, and his button of a mouth was wreathed in a genial smile.

"Good old Pu-Yi came for me about two o'clock this morning, Sir Thomas, and told me all that had happened. I say, sir, *what* a man to have on the staff of the *Evening*

Special! What an intellect!"—I seemed to have heard that phrase before. "Why, we'd have him dictating to Cabinet Ministers within a year!"

I lay idly watching this brilliant and faithful boy; journalist once, I reflected, journalist forever. There's no getting it out of the blood, and here, if I'm not mistaken, when many of us have faded away from Fleet Street forever, will be the biggest of us all.

I was surprised to find that Bill was distinctly on the side of Gideon Morse in his anticipation of evil. We argued it out while I was dressing and I insisted that the City was impregnable.

"To all ordinary appearance, to all ordinary efforts, yes. But I shall never change my belief that there's nothing that human wit can invent that human wit cannot circumvent."

After breakfast, which I took alone, the servant led me to a great white house standing among conservatories, which I learned was almost an exact reproduction of the Palacete Mendoza, the residence of Gideon Morse at Rio. And there, in her own charming sitting-room, fragrant with flowers and stamped in a hundred ways with her personality, Juanita was waiting. She was radiant. Happiness lay about her like sunbeams. I never saw any one more changed than she was from the girl I had met the night before.

"Come, dearest," she said, "and I'll show you some of our wonders. I could not show you all of them in one day. Oh, Tom, isn't it all splendid, couldn't you sing and shout for joy!"

I helped her into a fur coat—for it was bitter cold outside, though the wind of the night before had dropped—and was provided with one myself as we left the house. Standing in the patio was a little two-seated automobile, a tiny toy of a thing run from electric storage batteries, which made no noise louder than the humming of a wasp. We got into this and Juanita was like a child as she pulled the starting lever and we rolled away.

I have said I woke to find my bedroom full of sunlight, but, as we glided down an arcade of conservatories, upon each side of the road, so that the illusion of passing among a palm grove was almost complete, I noticed that dark and angry clouds were gathering not far above our heads, and it was through one single aperture that the sunlight poured. The effect of this, when we ran through the tunneled archway and came out into a great square, was curious. A third of the buildings which towered up on every side were bathed in glory, the rest, gray, sullen, and throwing shadows of sable upon the lawns, gravel sweeps, and parquet flooring. We investigated a dozen marvels of which I shall not speak here. The whole experience was a dream of luxury so wonderful, and so fantastic also, that my readers must wait for William Rolston's book, now nearing completion. It was impossible to believe that we were actually walking, motoring, more than two thousand feet above London in a little world of our own which bore no relation whatever to ordinary human life.

This was especially borne in upon me with overwhelming force when we had ascended the steps of a tower and came

out into a glass chamber on the roof, where an old Chinese gentleman with tortoise-shell spectacles showed us the great telescope which Morse had installed. Following the shifting path of sunlight, I got a dim glimpse of the English Channel over a far-flung champaign of fertile woods and downs, studded here and there with toy towns the size of threepenny-pieces. Once, but only for a moment, I made out the great towers of Canterbury Cathedral, but the sun shifted and the vision passed. London itself, brought immediately to our feet, was an astonishing sight, but as every one has seen the photographs taken from aeroplanes I will not dilate upon it, though it differed in many ways from these.

Perhaps the most pleasing sight of all was that of Richmond Park, where the winter Fair had just begun. We could see the roundabouts, the swings, and so forth, with great clearness, and even, as the wind freshened, catch a faint buzzing noise from the steam organs. Then a captive balloon rose up, I suppose a thousand feet, and some quarter of a mile away. With powerful field glasses we could see the big basket crammed with adventurous trippers, till she was hauled down again to make another ascent and add a few more pounds to the profits of her proprietors.

I was quite tired when we went back to the house to lunch.

During the meal, which was long and elaborate, Morse showed a side of his nature I had never before seen. He was not jovial or in high spirits—distinctly not that—but

he was strangely tender and human. I realized the immense love he had for Juanita, and wondered how he could ever bear to see her love me. But he was kindness itself—like a father, to the interloper who had stormed his fortress, and I always like to think of him as he was on that afternoon, full of anecdotes about his youth, of Juanita's mother, of the old days in Brazil. It was my formal whole-hearted reception into his life. Henceforth I was to be—he said it once in well and delicately-chosen words—a son to him, who had never had a son.

In the afternoon I went back to my own quarters, which consisted of a villa at the end of the Palace gardens, where I was lodged with Rolston, and attended by various well-trained Chinamen. I had rarely seen a more delightful bachelor dwelling. I took a cup of tea with Bill about four o'clock. It was now quite dark, and the bitter wind was rising again, but heavy curtains of tussore silk were pulled over the windows, a fire of yew logs burned in the open hearth, and softly shaded electric lights all combined to produce the coziest and most homelike effect it is possible to imagine.

It was then that a man came in to say that Mr. Pu-Yi begged the honor of an audience.

Bill vanished, and my thin, ascetic friend glided in, and at my invitation sank into a chair by the fire. I don't think, in the whole course of my life, I could recall a conversation which touched, interested, and excited my admiration more than this, and I have met every one "from Emperor to Clown." He apologized profoundly for his seem-

ing treachery. With a wealth of lucid self-analysis and the power of presenting a clear statement which I have seldom heard equaled, he showed how he was torn between his new-born debtorship to me, his loyalty to Morse, for whom he professed a profound esteem, and—here he hinted with extraordinary *finesse*—his mute adoration for Juanita.

"It was, Sir Thomas, touch and go, of course. I was in the position of a surgeon who has to risk everything upon one heroic stroke of the knife. I did so, and behold, all the conflicting elements are reconciled. The pieces of the puzzle have come together."

"My friend," I said, "betray me twenty million times if you can bring me such happiness as you have brought. Besides, it wasn't a betrayal, it was a great brain leading a smaller one to its appointed goal."

We talked a little more, he drank tea, he smoked, and, to my growing discomfort, I found in him the same note of pessimism and apprehension that Morse could not conceal, and Rolston himself had partially revealed.

"But I *won't* believe that any harm can come to Miss Morse," I said, almost angrily.

The thin lips smiled.

"That I never said, Sir Thomas. There are no indications of that. You and your lady are in peril, but you will win through."

"Confound it, man, your liver must be out of order. It seems to me that captivity in this magnificent bird-cage has the same effect on every one. I shall get Morse to come and hunt with me in the Shires. I've got a nice little

box in Gloucestershire, close to Chipping Norton, and by Jove, Pu-Yi, I'll mount you and give you a run with the Heythrope. You talk as if you actually knew something. As if you had information of a calamity."

"I hear it in the wind," he said strangely, and his voice was like a withered leaf blown before the wind. Then he left me.

I dined with Juanita and her father. Bill was asked too, and he kept my girl, and sometimes even Mr. Morse, in fits of laughter with stories of his short but erratic career, and especially a racy account of his illicit opium-selling down below.

"You see, sir," he said, "you brought it on yourself, by kidnaping me in the first instance. I had to get my own back."

Morse's face clouded over for a moment.

"It was a disgraceful thing to do," he said. "I quite admit it, but had the necessity arisen I'd have kidnaped George Robey or the Prince of Wales," and from that moment always I seemed to see that a faint but perceptible shadow was creeping over his spirits.

We had a little music, in a charming room built for the purpose. Juanita played upon the guitar and sang little Spanish love songs. Bill "obliged" with a ditty which he said was a favorite of the revered Charles Lamb, which seemed to consist entirely of the following lines:

"Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John
Went to bed with his breeches on."

I think that when Juanita said good-night to us all—and to me privately in the passage—she went to bed quite happy and cheerful.

About half-past ten Bill slipped off and I remained to smoke a final cigar with Morse.

"I'm low, Thomas," he said, "I'm very low to-night."

I made him take a little whisky and potash—a thing he rarely did.

"It's the unnatural life, sir, that you've condemned yourself to recently. You come out of this and hunt with me in Gloucestershire and I'll protect you as well as you're protected here, and you'll get as right as rain."

"You're very kind," he replied, "but—take care of her, Kirby, for God's sake, take care of her. She'll have no one else in the world but you if they get me or Pu-Yi."

I was about to expostulate again when the door opened and Boss Mulligan slouched in.

"Been all round the City, governor, with the usual patrol. Everything quiet, nothing unusual anywhere. All the servants have given in their tallies and are safe in their quarters."

Morse looked at me.

"That's our system, Tom," he said. "At a certain hour all the servants go to the lower stage, except those that may be urgently wanted. For instance, there's a fellow in your house to valet you to-night. Juanita has her little Spanish maid, and I think Pu-Yi keeps some one. Otherwise we are all to ourselves up here. All the lift doors are locked on the second stage and so is the central staircase. Mulligan

here is on guard all night in the room where you saw him."

"An' watchin' ye from the ind of me eye, Sorr Thomas," said the genial ruffian, "av ye'll belave ut."

"You're a good actor, Mulligan," I said—it seemed about the only thing I could say.

"Sure, an' I am that," he said, "I am that, sorr, but I'm a bether doer. An' av ye'd reely bin staling in—"

His immense fist clenched itself and he shook it in my direction.

"Mulligan, go back to the guard-room," said Morse, "you're drunk."

The giant's face changed from ferocity into pained surprise.

"But av course, sorr," he said, "it's me usual time, as your honor must know. But begob, I'm efficient!"

The mingled grin and glare on his countenance when Mr. Mulligan went away left no doubt in my mind about that.

A few minutes afterwards, certainly not drunk, and I hope efficient, I left the Palacete Mendoza, and walked through the gardens to the villa. Morse himself barred the door after me.

It was bitter, aching cold and the wind was razor-keen. Gaunt wreaths of mist were all around like a legion of ghosts, and I realized that the clouds were descending upon us, and soon I should not be able to see a yard before me, though the electric lamps that never went out all night, over the whole City, glowed with a dim blueness here and there through the fog.

However, I found the villa all right, and my Chinese boy

waiting in the hall. He took my coat, saw that the fires in the sitting-room and the adjoining bedroom were made up, and then I told him he might be off to his quarters on the second stage, for which he seemed extremely thankful.

I don't suppose he had been gone more than a minute when the door of my sitting-room opened and Rolston came in quickly. He was wearing a dressing-gown and pyjamas and his hair was all rough like one recently aroused from sleep.

"What on earth's the matter?" I said.

"I undressed," he said, "in my bedroom, which is just above yours as you know, and fell asleep in my chair with all the lights on. I woke only a short time ago, and before switching off the lamps I went to the window to see what sort of a night it was."

"Hellish, if you want to know."

"The light streamed out upon a great curtain of mist, almost like the projector lamp upon a screen of a kinema. Sir Thomas, as I stood there I could swear that something big, black and oblong sank down from that darkness above, passed through my zone of light and disappeared in the blackness below."

"What on earth do you mean, what sort of a thing?"

He hesitated for a moment and then he said:

"Almost like a group of statuary, though I only saw it for a mere instant."

He had obviously been half dreaming when he went to the window, his eyes, even now, were heavy with sleep.

"Simply and solely a trick of the wind upon the mist,

and your own figure interposing between the light and the window, and throwing a momentary shade on the swaying white curtain outside. The mist's as thick as linen and it changes every moment. You go to bed properly, and sleep the sleep of the just."

He didn't attempt to argue, but looked a little ashamed of himself for obtruding for such a trivial reason. Ten minutes afterwards I was also in bed and fast asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I HAD ordered my Chinese boy to wake me at eight. In one corner of the Grand Square was a beautifully fitted gymnasium with a swimming-bath adjoining. I proposed three-quarters of an hour's vigorous exercise before dressing.

At it happens I generally wake more or less at the time I want to. This morning, however, it was half-past eight. There was no sound of Chang whatever. I got out of bed, put on a sweater, Norfolk jacket, flannel trousers, and tennis shoes—I had sent for a portmanteau of clothes from the "Golden Swan"—went across the hall and let myself out into the gardens.

Then I hesitated in amazement. A thick, heavy, impenetrable mist hid everything from sight. It seemed as solid as wool. One literally had to push one's way through it, and when I say that I couldn't see more than a yard before my face, I mean it in the strict sense of the words. Still, I remembered that I have a good sense of topography, and I was quite confident that I could find my way to the central Square, where there would be sure to be people about whom I could ask.

From my front door there was a good hundred and twenty yards of wide gravel path to the Palacete Mendoza. I sprinted up this in less than twenty seconds I should say, and then warily turned into the palm-tree grove—the great

sheets of plated glass on either side of the way were in place now, but I knew where I was because of the different quality of the ground, which was here paved with wood blocks. Soon, a faint gray mass to my right, the palace itself loomed up, but the blanket of mist was too thick for me to discern windows or doors. One could see nothing but the gray hint of mass.

The curious thing was that one could hear nothing either. That had not struck me as I did my sprint, but now it did, and most forcibly. Of course there was no sound of wind —had there been any wind we should not have been buried in the very heart of this fog—thicker and more sticky than anything I had ever experienced in the Alps themselves. But there were no sounds of occupation such as an extensive place like the City might have been expected to produce at this hour, and in fact, as I realized, *did* produce, when I remembered yesterday. The place was never noisy. It was a haunt of peace if ever there was one. But the sound of gardeners and servants going about their daily toil, the distant throbbing of an engine perhaps, a subdued voice giving an order, the plashing of fountains, and the strains of music, all these were utterly and entirely absent. It was as though the mist killed not only vision but hearing also. I might have been on the top of Mont Blanc.

> "What little town by harbor or sea-shore
> Is empty of its folk this pious morn?"

I quoted to myself with a laugh, just as I entered the arched tunnel wide enough for two coaches to be driven under it abreast, which I knew led to Grand Square.

I laughed, and then quite suddenly all laughter went out of me. I couldn't explain it at the moment, but the mist, the loneliness, my whole surroundings, seemed quite horrible.

Surely something had passed me? I called out, and my voice seemed like the bleating of a sheep. Of course, it was illusion. My nerves had suddenly gone wrong. But, honestly, I felt that there was something *nasty* in the atmosphere, nasty from a psychic point of view I mean. There are moments when the human soul turns sick and retches with disgust, and I experienced such a moment now. I think it was exactly then that I knew, though I wouldn't allow myself to believe it, that I knew inwardly all was not well. I walked on and my india-rubber shoes seemed to make a sly, unpleasant noise—it was the only one I heard even now.

I could see nothing, I was quite uncertain of where I was, so I turned and walked straight to the right until, from the impact of the air upon my face, I knew that I was within a yard or so of some building. This was correct. My hand touched what seemed like stonework, and glancing up I became aware that a building rose high above.

I followed this along, keeping my hand on the stone, moving it round projecting buttresses and going with great caution. This insect-like progression seemed to be endless. I took out my watch, which I had shoved into the breast pocket of my Norfolk jacket. It was nearly nine o'clock, and not a single sound!

A second or two afterwards I came to a balustrade, felt my way along it, and found that I was at the foot of a broad flight of steps. There seemed something vaguely familiar here, and as I ran up them I began to be sure that I was at the library. I knew that Pu-Yi lived somewhere on the premises and I felt all over the great iron-studded door until I came to the small postern wicket through which one generally entered. This was locked, but a bell-pull of wrought iron hung at the side and I pulled at it lustily for a considerable time.

It opened with a jerk and Pu-Yi stood there in his skull cap with the coral button on the top and wrapped in a bear-skin robe.

"Thank goodness I've found some one," I said. "I've lost my way. I was going to the gymnasium, to exercise a little and then have a swim. My boy didn't turn up so I came out by myself."

"Come in, come in, Sir Thomas," he said, peering out at the white curtain. "What a dreadful morning! I've been here some months now, but I have never seen it so bad as this. I daresay it will blow off by nine o'clock or so when the sun gets up."

"It's nine o'clock now," I told him.

He started violently.

"Then my servant also is at fault," he said. "I ordered my coffee for eight. I was reading far into the night and must have overslept myself. This is very curious."

"Do you know, I don't quite like it, Pu-Yi. I've come

all the way from the pavilion in the Palace gardens and haven't heard the least sound of any sort whatever."

We passed through a lobby and entered the great library, which was cold and gray as a tomb.

Pu-Yi snapped at a switch, then at another. Nothing happened.

"The electric light is off!" he cried. "What an extraordinary thing!"

"Mine wasn't," I said. "I got out of bed and dressed by it."

He did not reply, but took down the speaking part of a telephone and turned the handle of the box. In that gray light his thin face, with its expression of strained attention, was one I shall not easily forget.

He turned the handle again, angrily. Again an interval of silence.

"The telephone is out of order," he said, and we looked at each other with a question in our eyes.

"Well, I'm confoundedly glad I've found you," I said.

"We must look into this at once, Sir Thomas. I can find my way perfectly well to one of the lifts at the other end of the Square. We must summon assistance. One moment." He vanished for a minute and returned with something cool and shining which he pressed into my hand. It was a venomous ten-shot Colt automatic. "You never know," he whispered.

We hurried across the great Square, passing by the central fountain basins, though the fountains were not playing, which added to our uneasiness. Everything was deathly

still until we came to the little lift pavilion. I half expected the thing to stick, but it glided down easily enough. As if my companion read my thoughts he said:

"All these small lifts are not electrical, but are worked by hydraulic power, the station for which is in the City and not below on the earth."

I shall never forget the extraordinary sight as we stepped from the lift. The mist here was nothing like so thick as it was above. This was owing to the fact that a hundred feet above our heads there was the immense ceiling of steel plates and girders upon which the City rested. As I said before, on all three sides this second service City was open to the air, but not above. Consequently the mist moved in tall white shapes like ghosts; it entirely surrounded one group of huts and left another great vista of buildings plain to the eye. Here a gaudily painted gable thrust itself out of the white sheet; there, through a proscenium of clinging wool, one saw the gray interior of a machine-room. A chill twilight brooded everywhere. There wasn't a single lamp burning, and from one end to the other lay the desolation of utter silence.

I leant against the jamb of the lift door, and, despite the cold, the sweat ran down my body in a stream.

Pu-Yi raised a thin arm over his head and it seemed to clutch crookedly at the somber panoply aloft.

A high, thin wail came from his parted lips and went mournfully away down the deserted streets and empty habitations.

For myself, I had been so stunned that I couldn't think,

but my friend's despairing call seemed to jerk some cog-wheel within the brain and start again the mechanism of thought.

I gripped him by the shoulder.

"There isn't a soul here," I rasped out. "What does it mean, what on earth does it mean?"

"There should be three hundred at least," he answered.

I broke away at a run, flung open the first door I came to and peered in. It was some sort of a sleeping-room, there were bunks and couches all around the walls. Each one of them was empty. I had time to see that, and also that a stand of short carbines and cutlasses was full of weapons.

Then I had to back out quickly for the late inmates had left an odorous legacy behind them.

Pu-Yi faced me.

"That was one of the patrol rooms," he said.

Then I remembered our coming two days ago.

"Mulligan!" I cried. "Nobody could get here except through the guard-room, nobody could leave here except through that, could they?"

"Not unless they threw themselves from the side of the tower."

"Well, it's quite impossible to believe that three hundred people have committed suicide during the night without a sound being heard. Quick! let's get to the bottom of this."

Pu-Yi led. He didn't seem really to run, only to glide along the ghostly streets and passages. But I had hard work to keep up with him, all the same. My mouth felt

as if it had been sucking a brass tap. The most deadly fear clutched at my heart—that noiseless, pattering run through the deserted town in the air, accompanied always by the mouthing, gibbering ghosts of the mist, was appalling.

We dashed down the last corridor and were brought up by a stout door. Pu-Yi bent down to the handle, turned it gently, and—it opened.

We tiptoed into that room. Directly I was over the threshold, the spiritual odor of death, of violent death, came to me.

A fire of logs was still burning redly upon the hearth. For the rest the room was lit only by its skylight, through which filtered a dirty and opaque illumination which was only sufficient to give every object a shape of the sinister or bizarre. The red glow from the fire glistened upon the polished screen of steel which divided the room into two portions. And it also fell, redly, upon something else.

This was the corpse of Mulligan.

It was seated in a chair which had been pulled up to the screen with its back towards it, as if in mockery and derision of its power to keep it.

He had been strangled by a yard of catgut, twisted, tourniquet-fashion, by a piece of stick at the back of the neck. The catgut had sunk far into the flesh, reducing the neck to less than half its ordinary size, and the great staring head hung down upon one shoulder.

One of the logs in the grate fell with a crackle of sparks. For the rest, dead silence.

"They have come," Pu-Yi said simply.

"But what has happened?" I whispered, my throat was so dry that the sound was like the rustling of paper.

"I shall know soon. I am going to find out. There is not a minute to lose. Can you, dare you, wait here—"

I nodded and he was out of the room in a flash. Upon the dead man's table was the usual array of bottles and glasses. I took some brandy and gulped it down and my brain cleared instantly. There was a little touch of infinite pathos even in this hideous moment, for by the side of an empty glass I saw a string of beads with a little metal crucifix. The Irishman, a Roman Catholic of course, must have been saying his prayers some time before he met his end. Somehow the thought comforted me and gave me power to act. I found a knife, and cut the bonds that tied the giant to the chair. I lowered him reverently to the floor and finally severed the horrible ligature around his throat. An examination of the steel door in the screen of bars showed that it was securely locked, but the bunch of keys which the dead man usually carried upon a chain was no longer there—the end of the chain dangled from his trousers pocket.

While I was doing these things a most deadly apprehension was standing specter-like by my side and plucking with wan fingers at my sleeve. What had happened, what might even now be happening at the Palacete Mendoza?

Pu-Yi whirled into the room. He made no noise, it was as though a dried leaf had been blown in by the wind. His face was transformed. Every outline was sharpened, and the color was changed until it bore the exact resemblance to

a mask of green bronze. In its frozen immobility it was dead, yet awfully alive, and the eyes glittered like little crumbs of diamond.

"Well?"

"I know how it has been done. It is very clever, very clever indeed. Let me tell you that all the power cables connecting us with below have been scientifically cut. We can neither telephone down to the Park nor can we descend to it in one of the lifts. We are isolated up here in the clouds."

"But the men, the staff?" I gasped, and then I stepped back, staring down at his hands. They were all foul and stained with blood.

"Not far away," he said, "there is another body, that of my servant, a youth from my own Province, whom I loved and whom I was educating. He was alive five minutes ago. He had just time to sob out the truth and his repentance."

"Tell me quickly, Pu-Yi, time presses."

"They caught him last night, so they must have been here then."

"Who caught him?"

"He never knew. They were masked, but there were two of them, and from his description we know very well who they were. Sir Thomas, they tortured him for a long time until he spoke, promising him freedom if he did so. His story was disjointed, gasped out with his dying breath, but I can put it together pretty well.

"They made him give an order by telephone from the

upper City that, immediately, the staff were to leave here and descend to the ground and await further orders, all but Mulligan, who was to remain at his post until I came to him. This message was delivered in Chinese to the man at the telephone exchange, and the poor boy was forced to counterfeit my voice. He was blindfolded immediately afterwards, but he heard a man speaking, and he said he could not have told the voice from that of Mr. Morse."

In a flash I saw the whole thing, in its devilish ingenuity, its fiendish completeness.

"Then we are absolutely alone, you, I, Mr. Rolston, Mr. Morse and his daughter?"

"And her maid," he answered quietly.

"At the mercy of—"

"That we have yet to prove. We must throw all emotion, all fear aside. That's what we have to do now. It's diamond cut diamond. There's one problem in my mind, and one only."

"What's that, quick!"

"I daresay that in an hour I could get down to the ground. Among the intricate steelwork of this tower there's a tiny circular staircase of open lattice-work, sufficient for the passage of one person only, and even here, every three or four hundred feet the way is barred by locked gates, though I have a master key to all of them. Shall I make the attempt, and risk crashing off into space—for it is a mere steeplejack's way—and summon assistance, which may well be another hour in arriving, for the tower cables have been scientifically cut and no one but an electrician could

repair them? Or shall I rush with you to defend the Palace?"

"You leave the decision to me?"

"It is in your hands, Prince."

"Then, old chap, tumble down this accursed tower, hell for leather, and rouse the pack. If I and Morse and Bill Rolston cannot account for these cowardly assassins, then one more man won't make any difference."

So I said, so I thought. I had no idea into what peril I was sending him, though I have sometimes wondered if he knew. He took my hand, kissed it, and beckoning me, we hurried through the silent under City towards the lift.

"You go up, Sir Thomas," he said, "and exercise the utmost care. Have your pistol ready. The mist is as thick as ever, which is in your favor. You can find your way now to the Palace, I am sure."

"And you?"

"I go off here," he said, pointing with his left arm down a long vista to where, under a square arch, there was nothing to be seen at all but swaying yellow-white. "One opens the gate in the railing and drops on to the circular stairs," he said, "which cling to the outside of the steel-work all the way down like a little train of ivy."

"*Au revoir,* be as quick as you can."

"Good-by," and I jumped into the elevator.

Some two minutes afterwards, when I was creeping through the wool with my pistol in my hand, alert for the slightest sound around me, I heard the sharp crack of a rifle. It came from behind me. There was a perceptible

interval and then another crack, followed, I could have sworn to it, by a thin wailing cry.

Then utter silence fell once more upon the white and muffled City.

As I ran I tried to steel myself, if that were as I suspected, the last dying cry of Pu-Yi, not to think about it. The immediate moment, the immediate future, these were everything.

All the extraordinary precautions had failed. The assassins were here! In what force? How had they come?—though that was useless to speculate on. Two things only remained. I must warn Morse if it was not already too late, must avenge him if it was. I resolutely put aside the thought of Juanita—of any personal feeling which might mar my judgment and unstring my nerves at this supreme and dreadful moment.

I found myself, somehow or other, at the entrance to the tunneled passage. Save for my own quick breathing there had not been a sound, and the horrible curtain of the fog was as thick as ever. Should I at once creep up to the Palace, or should I go back to the villa and find Rolston? It was a nice question and the decision had to be instantaneous. I decided that it would give me a tremendous advantage to have him with me, and besides that, he himself must be warned of the terror that lurked in the darkness of the cloud.

I arrived without any mishap, pushed open the door and was crossing the dark hall when my foot caught in some obstruction and I fell headlong. There was no time to

cry out, had I been startled enough to do so, before something leapt upon my back with a soft yet heavy thud. A hand slipped over my mouth and the round barrel of a pistol was pressed into my neck.

I lay helpless, thinking that it was all over, when the weight lifted, the pistol was snatched away and I was hauled to my feet to discover—Rolston.

"Not a word," he whispered. "I set a trap in the hall, Sir Thomas. Thank God you are alive!"

"Thank God you are too. Bill, they've strangled Mulligan, killed another Chinese by torture and I am very much afraid have shot Pu-Yi as he was trying to get down to earth to summon help.

"Every single member of the staff is down in the Park with orders to stay there—false orders. The lifts are all put out of action beyond possibility of being repaired for several hours. That's how things stand. Now we must get to the Palace as quickly as we possibly can. God knows what has happened or may be happening there."

"This way, quick!" he said, when he had listened to me with strained attention.

He took my arm, hurried me into the back part of the house, opened a door with a key and we entered a bedroom which I had not before seen. The windows were shuttered and curtained but the electric light—which never failed either my villa or the Palace during the whole of those terrible hours—made every detail clear. Upon the bed, lying as if asleep, was Juanita. Leaning over her was a tall, elderly, hard-featured French woman with a typical Norman face.

I staggered back into Bill Rolston's arms.

"Good God!" I cried, and then, "She's not dead, tell me she's not dead!"

Marie, the French maid, turned.

"She's perfectly well, M'sieu, only she's had a fainting fit and I've given her something to keep her quiet."

She spoke in French.

"Then how do you come here, what's happened?"

"At some time in the night, M'sieu, I think it must have been between two and three, the warning bell, which is always attached to my bed, began to ring. I knew exactly what to do. It was part of Mr. Morse's precautions, in which he had drilled us. When that bell rang, at whatever time of day or night, I was to wake M'selle instantly, dress her without a second's delay, and bring her out of the Palace by a secret way.

"I did so, and arrived in this room, where M'selle fainted. The door was locked from the outside, and as I have strict orders never to exceed my instructions by a hair's breadth, I have been waiting.

"Not very long ago M'sieu here"—she pointed to Rolston—"hearing some noise, unlocked the door and came in. To him I told what had happened."

"Thank God," I said aloud, "that she's safe," and in my heart I paid a tribute to the minutely detailed genius of Gideon Morse, who had at least foiled the panthers on his track in one, and the greatest particular.

"Very well then. Now we must leave you here while we hurry to the Palace to try and learn what has hap-

pened, and do what we can. You will not be afraid?"

"No, M'sieu," she replied simply. "There's an angel with us," and she crossed herself devoutly. "And, moreover," from somewhere about her waist she withdrew a long, keen knife, "I know what to do with this, M'sieu, in the last resort."

I went to the bed, I looked down at Juanita and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Now then, Bill, come along," I said.

Bill grinned.

"By the private way," he said, pointing to the French woman, who was removing a heavy Turkish rug which lay in front of the fireplace. There was a click, and a portion of the floor fell down, disclosing some steps, padded with felt.

"This way, M'sieu," she whispered, "the passage is lit, but here's a torch if you should need it, and here is the book."

She handed me a little leather-bound book about the size of a railway ticket.

"What's this?"

"Instructions in English and Chinese in regard to the secret room at the other end. They are few and simple, but Mr. Morse had them printed so that there could be no mistake if ever it became necessary to use the place and its machinery."

"He thinks of everything," said Bill, as we crept down into a fairly wide passage, and the trap-door above rose once more into its place.

The passage was fully a hundred and thirty or forty yards long and straight as an arrow. As we approached the end, which I saw to be hidden by a heavy curtain, I thought of the little leather covered book. Motioning Rolston to stop I opened it and read the English portion. There were about five or six pages, with one or two simple diagrams, and I blessed the journalistic training that enabled me to see the purport of the whole thing in a minute, though I gasped once more at the fertile ingenuity of Gideon Morse. Gently putting aside the heavy curtain, we entered a room of some size. The floor was heavily carpeted. Around two of the walls were couches piled with blankets. Upon shelves above were piles of stores—I saw boxes of biscuits, tins of condensed milk and many bottles of wine. The place was quite fourteen feet high and at one end four posts came down from the ceiling to the floor. They were grooved and the grooves were lined with steel which was cogged to receive a toothed wheel. Between the four posts, dropping some two feet from the ceiling, was what looked like the lower part of a large cistern or tank. This apparatus extended along the whole far end of the room, which was not square but square-oblong in shape. Immediately opposite to where we entered was an arrangement of levers, like the levers in a railway signal-box, though smaller; above these, sprouting out of the wall, were half a dozen vulcanite mouthpieces like black trumpets. Above each one was a little ivory label.

"What does it all mean?" Bill whispered.

I held up my hand for silence, looking round the place,

referring once or twice to the little book, and making absolutely sure. As I was doing so there was a sudden "pop," followed by the unmistakable gurgle of champagne into a glass.

It was the most uncanny thing I have ever heard, for it might have happened at my elbow. Had it not been that a tiny electric signal-bulb no bigger than a sixpence glowed out over one of the mouthpieces, I should have been utterly unnerved. This mouthpiece was labeled "Mr. Morse's study."

"The dictograph," I whispered to Rolston, and he pressed my arm to show he understood.

I think I would have given a thousand pounds myself for some champagne just then. We stood holding each other, frozen into an ecstasy of listening. I almost thought that one of Bill's remarkable ears was elongating itself until it coiled sinuously towards the wall, but this, no doubt, was illusion.

There came a voice, an urbane, and cultured voice, well modulated and serene.

It was all that, but as I heard it my blood seemed to turn to red currant jelly and to circulate no more in my veins. If there was ever a voice which was informed by some unnamable quality which came straight from the red pit of hell, we heard that voice then. Hearing it, I knew for the first time the meaning of those words: *The worm that dies not and the fire that is not quenched.*

"Whoever thought, Gideon Morse, that I should be breakfasting with you to-day! To tell the truth I didn't myself.

But as you know, I have always been a great gambler and now, at the end of all the games of chance that we have played together, I have turned up the final ace."

Another voice—Heaven! it was Morse himself who answered. His voice seemed almost amused. It was like coming out of a pitch dark room into summer sunlight to hear it after that other.

"Mark Antony Midwinter, you speak of triumph, but you were never nearer your ultimate end than you are at this moment"—I could have sworn I heard his dry chuckle and I moved nearer to the wall.

"This cold pheasant is quite excellent. What is the use of trying to bluff me? Your end has come and you know it. It isn't going to be a pleasant end, I expect you guess that. We have tossed the dice for many years, you and I. You've won over and over again. I had become an outcast on the face of the earth, until Fate made me the agent of a great vengeance."

This time Morse laughed outright.

"You offal-eating jackal!" he said. "Finish your stolen meal and get to work. You, the agent of a great vengeance! when not long ago you slunk into my London hotel and offered to sell your employers. I understand," he went on in a curiously impersonal voice, "that you really are supposed to be descended from a high English family. Even when I had you tarred and feathered—do you remember that, Antony?—many years ago, I still believed in your descent, though I own I didn't give it much of a thought. Tell me, where exactly did the kitchen-maid come in?"

Following upon Morse's words we heard the sound of footsteps and the scraping of a chair.

A new person had come into the room and Midwinter had risen to meet him.

"Well?"

The reply came in a deep bass voice.

"Nothing is changed. There was one Chinaman, it must have been the librarian of whom that guy we put through it, spoke—he came sliding along and tried to get down by the cat's cradle outside the tower. I was leaning out of that balcony window above, commanding every approach, and I got him with my second shot."

"Did he fall all the way down? That might startle them below."

"No. He just crumpled up on the stairs, and after looking round, I've come back here. There's a little wind beginning to get up and I shouldn't wonder if in an hour or so this mist-blanket is all blown away."

"Half an hour is enough for what we have to do, Zorilla. Just go over to Mr. Morse there and see if his lashings are secure—and then we must think about getting off ourselves."

It was as though Bill and I could see exactly what was happening in the library—the heavy tread, an affirmative grunt, and then the smooth hellish voice resuming:

"You know you've got to die, Morse, and die painfully. Nothing can alter that, but I'll let you off part of your agonies if you tell me at once where your daughter is. It

will only precipitate matters. We can easily find her as you must know."

"I don't like talking with you at all. You are both of you doomed beyond power of redemption. You have overcome some of my precautions, by what means I cannot tell. You've captured my person. You are about to wreak your disgusting vengeance on it. For Heaven's sake do so. You know nothing of this place you are in, or very little. Fools!" The voice rang out like a trumpet.

There was a murmured conference, the words of which we could not catch, then Midwinter said:

"We'll put you to the test a little, before Zorilla really begins—operating. Adjoining this apartment I see there is your most luxurious bathroom—the walls of onyx, the bath of solid silver. Well, we'll take you and put you in that bath and turn on the water. I'll stand over you, and with my hands on your shoulders, I'll plunge you an inch or two beneath the surface, till you are so nearly drowned that you taste all the bitterness of death. Then we'll have you up again and ask you a few questions. Perhaps you may have to go back into the bath a second time before Zorilla gets to the real work."

No words of mine can describe the malignancy of that voice, no words of mine can describe the shout of resolute, sardonic laughter which answered it.

Bill wanted to shout in answer, but I clapped my hand over his mouth just in time, and I could almost see the frowning faces of the two fiends as they advanced upon the bound man.

. . . Steps overhead; the little bulb over the mouthpiece labeled "Mr. Morse's study" goes out, and another lights up over the mouthpiece labeled "Bathroom." There is a jarring as a tap is turned on and a rush of water.

"That'll do, Zorilla. Two feet is quite enough for our purpose"—the voices are actually in the room now, much louder and clearer than before.

"You take the heels—steady, heavo!" and then a splash and a thud. We heard some one vaulting lightly into the bath.

"Now, Morse, I hold you up for a minute. I shall press you down under the water until you are as near dead as a man can be. Have you anything to say?"

"Yes. Give me one moment."

"Ten if you like."

Then there came in a calm, penetrating voice, "Are you there?"

I reached upward and smote with my clenched fist upon the outside of the bath. I heard a muttered exclamation, a slight splash, and then Bill Rolston pulled over a lever, and half the ceiling of our room sank towards us with a noise like the winding-up of a clock.

Midwinter was standing in one end of the bath, which hid him almost up to his waist. His jaw dropped like the jaw of a dead man. Such baffled hate and infinite malevolence stared out of his eyes that I gave a shout of relief as Rolston lifted his arm and fired.

He must have missed the fiend's head by a hair's breadth, no more. Quick as lightning he fired again, but he was too

late. Midwinter bounded out of the bath like a tennis ball, felled Rolston with a back-arm blow as he leapt, and fled down the passage.

The loud thunder of the explosions in that underground place had not died away before I had lifted Morse from under the water and dragged him over the side of the bath.

His face was very pale, but his eyes were open and he could speak.

Truly the man was marvelous.

"The other," he whispered, "the brute Zorilla! Juanita!"

I understood one of the devils, desperate now, was still at large, and even as I realized it, I saw a ghastly sight.

There was a noise above. I bent my head backward and looked up through the aperture in the ceiling.

A man was crouching over it and I saw his face and neck —a big, black-bearded face, with eyes like blazing coals, but *reversed*. His eyes were where his mouth should have been, his nostrils were like two pits, and for a forehead there was a grinning mouth full of gleaming teeth. Any one who, when ill, has seen their nurse or attendant bending over them from the back of the bed, will realize what I mean, though they can never understand the horror of that demoniac and inverted mask.

I was pretty quick on the target, but not quick enough. The thing whipped away even as I fired, and there was a thunder of feet running.

I think a sort of madness seized me, at any rate I was never in a moment's doubt as to what to do. I shoved my pistol in my pocket, leapt upon the edge of the bath, sprang upwards and caught the floor of the room above with my hands.

The rest was easy for any athlete in training. I pulled myself up, lay panting for a second and then stood upon the tiled floor of the bathroom.

The door leading into the library was open. I dashed through to find the place empty, rushed through the hall and out upon the steps of the main entrance. And then, joy! A morning wind had begun and instead of a white, impenetrable wall, a phantom army was retreating and, as if pursuing those ghost-like sentinels, was the black, running figure of Zorilla.

I had a clear glimpse of him as he plunged into the tunnel leading to Grand Square, and I was after him like a slipped greyhound.

In Grand Square it was clearing up with a vengeance. There were gleams of sunlight here and there and the mist had lifted for about twelve feet above my head.

I saw him bolt round the central fountain, hidden by an immense bronze dragon for a moment, and then legging it for all he was worth towards the way that led to the lifts for the second stage.

The wood floor had dried with the lifting of the mist and I was doing seven-foot strides. I was seeing red. There was a terrible cold fury at the bottom of my heart,

but in my mind there was a furious joy. With every stride I gained on him—this powerful, thick-set, baboon-like man from the forests of the Amazon.

I gave a loud, exulting "View-halloo," and the black head turned for an instant—he lost ten good yards by that. I whooped again. I meant to kill, to rend him in pieces. And for the first time in my life I realized the joy of primeval man: the lust of the hunt, red fang, red claw, to tear, dominate and destroy.

Oh, it was fine hunting!

Damn him! He snapped himself into one of the little lifts when I was within six yards of him. I saw his ugly face sink out of sight behind the glass panels. I remembered that these small hydraulic lifts worked, though the big ones below didn't. But I remembered something else . . . there was a stairway.

I found it by instinct, a great broad stair with tiled walls like the subway of some railway terminus.

I didn't bother about the stairs. I leapt down—preserving my balance by a miracle—six or seven at a time. Pounding out into the great empty City at the foot, I swirled round and was just in time to see my gentleman bolt out of his lift like a rabbit from its hole and run to where I knew was the outside stairway which fell, in its corkscrew path, barred by many gates, right down to safety and the normal world.

It was the way by which dear old Pu-Yi had hoped to descend and raise the alarm. It was the perilous eyrie upon which this same bull-like assassin had picked him off

like a sitting pigeon and boasted of it not half an hour before.

As he dodged and ran I fired at him, but never a bullet touched the brute and I flung the Colt away with an oath.

"Much better kill him with my own hands," I said in my mind, "much better tear his head off, break him up—"

I tell you this as it happened. For the moment I was a wild beast, in pursuit of another, but still, I think, a super-beast.

Well, never mind that. I saw him fumbling at a sort of fence, clearly outlined against an immense space of morning sky, and thundered after him—thundered, I say, because I was now running along an open steel grating, which seemed to sway . . .

Then I vaulted over where Zorilla had vaulted, and my heart leapt into my mouth as I fell—fell some eight feet on to a tiny platform, protected from space by a rail not more than three feet high.

I reeled, and caught hold of a stanchion and saved myself. Far, far below, London—London in color was unrolling itself like a map—and immediately below my feet, already a considerable distance down, was the slithering black spider that I had sworn to kill.

I could see him through the grid, and then I flung myself upon the corkscrew ladder, grasping the rails with my hands until the skin was burnt from them, disdaining the steps and spinning round and ever downwards like a great top.

As I went my head projected at right angles to my body. As I buzzed down that sickening height I saw that Zorilla

had stopped. I knew that he had come to one of the steel gates, at which he was fumbling uselessly.

Then, as I came to the last step before the little gate platform I saw also, under the curve of the stair, a huddled figure, and I knew who *that* was, who that had been . . .

I threw myself at Zorilla with my knee in the small of his back. Instantly I caught him round the throat with my fingers just on the big veins behind the ear which supply the brain with blood, and my fingers crushed the trachea until the whole supple throat seemed breaking under the molding of my grip.

I felt that I had got him. That if I could hold out for a minute he would be dead, but I hadn't reckoned with the immense muscular force of the body.

I clung like the leopard on the buffalo, but he began to sway this way and that. In front of us was the steel gate and the motionless figure of Pu-Yi. We were struggling upon the steel grid, not much larger than a tea table. A slight rail only three feet high defended us from the void —a little thigh-high rail between us and a drop of near two thousand feet.

He lurched to the left, and I swung out into immensity, carried on his back. I was sure it was the end, that I should be flung off into space, when with one arm he gripped the gate, braced all his great strength and slowly dragged us back into equilibrium. It seemed that the whole tower trembled, vibrated in a horrible, metallic music.

I pressed down my thumbs, I strained every sinew of my wrist and arm in the strangle hold, and I felt the life puls-

ing out of him in steady throbs. There was nothing else in the world now but myself and him and I ground my teeth and clutched harder.

In his death agony he lurched to the other side of our tiny foothold space. This was where the circular stairway ended. He caught his foot, so I was told afterwards, in the last stanchion of the stair, fell over the rail with a low, sobbing groan, and then, weighted by me upon his shoulders, began to slip, slip, slip, downwards.

And I with him.

I had conquered. I don't think that in that moment I had any feeling but one of wild, fierce joy. He was going, I was going with him, but I never thought of that, until my right ankle was clutched in a vice-like grip. I felt the warm, heaving body below me rush away, tearing my grip from its throat by its own dreadful impetus, and then, as I was snatched back with a jar of every bone in my body, there was a shrill whistling of air for a second as Zorilla went headlong to his doom, and I knew nothing else.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FALLING! Falling through deep waters, with a horrible sickening sense of utter helplessness and desolation; nerves, heart, mind—very being itself—awaited the crash of extinction. A slight jolt, a roaring of great waters in the air, and a voice, dim, thin and far away!

. . . In some mysterious way, the sense of sight was joined to that of sound and hearing. I was surrounded by blackness shot with gleams of baleful fire, shifting and changing until the black grew gray in furious eddies, the gray changed into the light of day, and a far-off voice became loud and insistent.

It was thus that I came to myself after the horror on the edge of the dizzy void.

The first thing I saw was the face of Juanita. There were tears in her eyes and her cheeks were brilliant. Then I heard, and even then with a start, a voice that I had never thought to hear again—the gentle, tripping accents of Pu-Yi.

"He will do now, Señorita. The doctor said that he would awake from his sleep with very little the matter except the shock—"

"Juanita!" I cried, and her cool hand came down upon my forehead.

"You are not to excite yourself, dearest," she said.

For a moment or two I lay there in a waking swoon of puzzled but entire bliss. Then I tried to move my position slightly upon the bed, for I was lying upon a bed in a large and airy room, and groaned aloud. Every muscle in my body seemed stretched as if upon the rack, and there was a pain like a red-hot iron in one ankle.

"It will hurt for a few hours," said Pu-Yi, "but you will shortly be massaged, Sir Thomas, and then—"

"You!" I cried, "but you are dead! Zorilla got you on the tower before—before—"

My mind leapt up into full activity. I was once more swaying upon the edge of infinity with my fingers locked in the bull neck of the assassin, and my voice died away into a whisper of horror.

"He stunned me, that was all, Sir Thomas. His bullet glanced away from my head. I came to myself just in time to see you struggling with him and gripped you just as you were falling off into space. The spirits of my ancestors were with me."

"And he—Zorilla?"

"Will never trouble us more. But you are not well enough yet to talk. You are in my hands for the present."

"Do exactly as Pu-Yi says, dear, and remember that all is well."

"Your father?" I gasped—why hadn't I thought of Morse before?

"All is well," she repeated in her low, musical voice, and as I lay back, trembling once more upon the edge of unconsciousness, her face left the circle of my vision.

Two deft Chinese *masseurs* came. I was placed in a hot bath impregnated with some strong salts. I was kneaded and pummeled until I could hardly repress cries of pain. I drank a cup of hot soup in which there must have been some soporific, and sank into a deep, refreshing sleep.

It had been late afternoon when I first came to myself. When I woke for the second time, it was night. The room was brilliantly lit. Pu-Yi was sitting by my bedside, quietly smoking a long, Chinese pipe, and, for my part, though I was very stiff, I was in full possession of all my faculties and knew that I had suffered no harm.

I sat up in bed and held out my hand to the Chinaman.

"Pu-Yi, I'm all right now. I owe my life to you!" And as I realized my extraordinary deliverance in the very article of death, a sob burst from me and I am not ashamed to say that my eyes filled with tears. My hand is as strong as most men's, but I almost winced at the grip of those fragile-looking, artistic fingers.

"You did the same for me, my honorable friend," he said quietly, "and now—"

Before I knew what he would be at, he was feeling my pulse and listening to my heart with his ear against my chest.

At length he gave a sigh of relief. "We had a doctor to you," he said, "and he told us that, in his opinion, you would be little the worse. I am rejoiced that his opinion is confirmed."

"Oh, I am all right now, and ready for anything."

"You are sure, Sir Thomas? What you have been through may have given you a shock which—"

For answer, I held out my hand. It was as firm as a rock and did not tremble. I heaved myself off the bed, took a cigarette from a box upon a table, and began to smoke.

"Now then, Pu-Yi, I am just as I was before. First of all, where am I?"

"You are in the Palacete," he replied. "You were brought here at once."

Then I knew that I was in Morse's dwelling house, copied exactly, as I have said before, from the Palacete Mendoza at Rio.

"Now tell me exactly what has happened, in as few words as possible."

"I am only too anxious to do so, Sir Thomas. You were brought back here. Immediately after, Rolston descended by means of the outside stair and summoned the staff. They are all here now. The electric cables have been repaired. Lifts, telephones, electric light, and all the other machinery is in working order. The body of Zorilla has been brought up to the City and placed with that of Mulligan and my own servant. This house is strongly guarded by armed men, and the whole City is patrolled."

"No one else was hurt?"

"No one else at all, Sir Thomas."

His face changed as he said this, and he looked me full in the eyes.

Then, with a start, I understood. Every detail of the

past came back in a vivid, instantaneous picture. Again I saw the silver bath descending from the ceiling and heard the loud explosion of Rolston's pistol. And as that furious noise resounded in my mental ear, once more the grinning, corpse-pale face of Mark Antony Midwinter passed close to mine and I felt the very wind of his passage as he rushed by and disappeared down the long underground corridor leading to the safety-room.

"Midwinter!" I almost shouted. The face of the Chinaman had gone a dusky gray—he told me afterwards that mine was white as linen.

"Vanished," he said—"disappeared utterly. And he is the master-mind! While Mark Antony Midwinter is alive, Mr. Morse, none of us, will know a moment of safety or of ease."

I could not quarrel with that. Zorilla was dead—a great gain—but no one who had been through what I had and who knew the whole situation as I knew it, could fail to appreciate the terrible seriousness of this news. To you who read this record in peace and safety, this may seem a wild or exaggerated statement, a product of overstrained nerves. But, believe me, it was not so. I knew too much! The securest fortress in the whole world had been already stormed. All the precautions that enormous wealth and some of the subtlest brains alive could take had already proved useless against the superhuman cunning, energy and ferocity of this being who seemed, indeed, literally, more fiend than man. No! we were no cowards,

most of us, up there in the City of the Clouds, but we might well quail still, to know that this fury was unchained. I know that I sat down suddenly upon the bed with a groan of despair.

"Gone! Vanished! Surely he must be either in the City or has escaped! If he is in the City, I admit the danger is imminent. He must be utterly desperate, and will stick at nothing. If he has managed to get down to the earth, he is dangerous still, but we have a breathing space. Which is it?"

"We do not know, Sir Thomas. There is no trace of him anywhere, so far. But, as I have said, we have more than a hundred men, armed and patrolling the City. This house, at any rate, is secure for the moment. A great search is being organized. The whole area is being mapped out and it will be searched with such thoroughness before to-morrow's dawn that a rat could not escape. My own theory is, and Mr. Morse agrees with me, that Midwinter is still in the City. The most scrupulous inquiries below seem to prove that he never descended from the tower, and you know how minute and careful our organization is. And now that you are yourself again, it is Mr. Morse's wish that we hold a conference and settle exactly what is to be done. Do you think you are equal to it?"

"Perfectly," I replied, and without another word Pu-Yi led the way out of the room.

I found Mr. Morse sitting in his library. He was pale, and seemed much shaken. There were red rims round the

keen, masterful eyes, but his voice was strong and resolute, and I could see that, whatever his opinion of his chances, he would fight till the end.

I need not go into details of the private conversation we had for a minute or two. His gratitude was pathetic, and I felt more drawn to him than ever before. When at length Juanita, followed by little Rolston, entered the room, all trace of his emotion had gone and we settled down round the table as calm and businesslike as a board of directors in a bank. And yet, you know, no group of people in Europe stood in such peril as we did then. Behind the long, silken curtains, the shutters were of bullet-proof steel. The corridor outside, the gardens of the house, swarmed with men armed to the teeth. It was dark in the sky, but the City in the Clouds blazed everywhere with an artificial sunlight from the great electric lamps.

Two thousand feet up in the air we sat and spoke in quiet voices of the horror that was past and the horror that threatened us. Far down below, London was waking up to a night of pleasure. People were dressing for dinners and the theater, thousands upon thousands of toilers had left their work and were about to enjoy the hours of rest and recreation. And not a soul, probably, among all those millions that crawled like ants at our feet had the least suspicion of what was going on in our high place. They were accustomed to the great towers now. The sensation of their building was over and done, there were no more thrills. If they had only known!

I was not aware if strata of clouds hid us from the

world below, as so often happened; but if the night were clear I do remember thinking that any one who cast their eyes up into the sky might well notice an unusual brilliancy in the pleasure city of the millionaire, that mysterious theater of the unknown, which dominated the greatest city in the world.

. . . "Well, Tom," said Mr. Morse, "Pu-Yi tells me that you are now acquainted with all the facts. The question we have to decide is, what are we to do?"

He turned to Juanita, and nodded. She left the room.

"The situation, as I understand it," I replied, "is that Midwinter"—I had a curious reluctance in pronouncing the name aloud—"is either concealed here in the City or has made his escape. If he is here, we shall know before to-morrow morning, shall we not?"

"Precisely. I have spent the last hour in going over the plans of the City with the chiefs of the staff. We have divided up the two stages into small sections, and even while I am talking to you the search has begun. The orders are to shoot at sight, to kill that man with less compunction than one would kill a mad dog. If he is really here, he cannot possibly escape."

"Very well, then," I said, "let us turn our attention to the other possibility. Assuming that he has got away, I think we may safely say that the danger is very much lessened."

"While we remain here in the City—yes," Morse agreed.

"And you are determined to do that?"

He took the cigar he had been smoking from his lips,

and his hand shook a little. "Think what you like of me," he said, "but remember that there is Juanita. I say to you, Kirby, that if I never descend to the world again alive, I must stay here until Mark Antony Midwinter is dead."

Well, I had already made up my mind on this point. "I think you are quite right," I told him. "Still, he will not make a second appearance in the City. You can treble your precautions. He must be attacked down in the world."

Then a thought struck me for the first time. "But how," I said, "did he and Zorilla ever come here in the first instance? Treachery among the staff? It is the only explanation."

Pu-Yi shook his head. "You may put that out of your mind, Sir Thomas," he said. "That is my department. I know what you cannot know about my chosen compatriots."

"But the man isn't a specter! He's a devil incarnate, but there's nothing supernatural about him."

Then little Rolston spoke. "I've been down below all day," he said, "and though I haven't discovered anything of Midwinter, I am certain of how he and Zorilla got here."

We all turned to him with startled faces.

"Do you remember, Sir Thomas," he said, "that, shortly after your arrival, when you were looking down upon London from one of the galleries, there was a big fair in Richmond Park?"

I remembered, and said so.

"Among the other attractions, there was a captive balloon—"

Morse brought his hand heavily down upon the table with a loud exclamation in Spanish.

"Yes, there was, but—but it was quite half a mile away and never came up anything like our height here."

"No," the boy answered, "not at that time. But do you remember how during the fog last night I told you I had seen something, or thought I had seen something, like a group of statuary falling before my bedroom window?"

Something seemed to snap in my mind. "Good heavens! And I thought it was merely a trick of the mist! Nothing was discovered?"

"No, but in view of what happened afterwards, I formed a theory. I put it to the test this morning. I made a few inquiries as to the proprietors of the captive balloon and the engine which wound it up and down by means of a steel cable on a drum. I need not go into details at the moment, but the whole apparatus did not leave Richmond Park when it was supposed to do so. The wind was drifting in the right direction, the balloon could be more or less controlled—certainly as to height. I have learned that there was a telephone from the car down to the ground. Desperate men, resolved to stick at nothing, might well have arranged for the balloon to rise above the City—the cable was quite long enough for that—and descend upon part of it by means of a parachute, or, if not that, a hanging rope. More dangerous feats than that have been done in the air and are upon record. It seems to me there is no doubt whatever that this is the way the two men broke through all our precautions."

There was a long silence when he had spoken. Mendoza Morse leant back in his chair with the perspiration glittering in little beads upon his face, but he wore an aspect of relief.

"You've sure got it, my friend," he said at length, "that was how the trick was done! It was the one possibility which had never occurred to me, and hence we were unprovided. Well, that relieves my mind to a certain extent. We can take it that we are safe in the City, if Midwinter has escaped. How are we to make an end of him?"

"The difficulty is," I said, "that we are, so to speak, both literally and actually above, or outside, the Law. If that were not so, if ordinary methods could deal with this man, or could have dealt with the Hermandad in the past, Mr. Morse would never have planned and built the eighth wonder of the world. No word of what has happened in the last day or two must get down to the public—isn't that so?"

Morse nodded. "It goes without saying," he said. "We have our own law in the City in the Clouds. At the present moment, there are three bodies awaiting final disposal—and there won't be any inquest on them."

"That," Rolston broke in, "was something I was waiting to hear. It's important."

He stopped, and looked at me with his usual modesty, as if waiting permission to speak. I smiled at him, and he went on.

"It is an absolute necessity," he said, "to enter into the psychology of Midwinter. We may be sure that his

purpose is as strong as ever. The death of Zorilla, and his present failure, will not deter him in the least, knowing what we know of him?"

He looked inquiringly at Morse.

"It won't turn him a hair's breadth," said the millionaire. "If he was mad with blood-lust and hatred before, he must be ten times worse now."

"So I thought, sir. He has lost his companion, as desperate and as cunning as himself, but we can be quite certain that he is not without resources. I think it safe to assume that he has practically an unlimited supply of money. He must have other confederates, though whether they are in his full confidence or not is a debatable question. That, however, at the moment, is not of great importance. We have him in London, let us suppose, for it is the safest place in the world for a man to hide—in London, determined, and hungering for revenge. We have no idea what his next scheme will be, and in all human probability he hasn't planned either. He must be considerably shaken. He will know, now, how tremendously strong our defenses are, and it will not escape a man of his intelligence that they will now be greatly strengthened. It will take him some time to gather his wits together and work out another scheme. The only thing to do, it seems to me, is to force his hand."

"And how?" Morse and I said, simultaneously.

"We must trap him—not here at all, but down there, in London"—he made a little gesture towards the floor with his hand, and as he did so, once more the strange and eerie remembrance of where we were came over me, lost

for a time in the comfortable seclusion of a room that might have been in Berkeley Square.

"Here *we*, that is the Press, come in," said Rolston, smiling proudly at me.

I smiled inwardly at the grandiloquence of the tone, and yet, how true it was!—this lad who, so short a time ago had got to see me by a trick, was certainly the most brilliant modern journalist I had ever met. I made him a little bow, and, delighted beyond measure, he continued.

"Let it be put about," he said, "with plenty of detail, rumor, contradiction of the rumor and so on—in fact we will get up a little stunt about it—that Mr. Mendoza Morse has tired of his whim. For a time, at any rate, he is going to make his reappearance in the world. If necessary, announce Miss Juanita's engagement to Sir Thomas. Get all London interested and excited again."

Morse nodded, his face wrinkled with thought. "I think I see," he said, "but go on."

"When this is done, let us put ourselves in Midwinter's place. I believe that he will have no suspicion of a trap. He will argue it in this way. We are too much afraid of him to attack ourselves. Hitherto, all our measures have been measures of defense and escape. It will hardly occur to him that we have changed all our tactics. He will think that, with the failure of his attempt, the bad failure, and the death of Zorilla—which I have no doubt he will have discovered by now—we imagine he will abandon all his attempts. He will say to himself that we now believe ourselves safe and that his power is over, his initiative broken,

that he will never dare to go on with his campaign. Everything seems in favor of it. I should say that it is a hundred to one that his line of thought will be precisely as I have said."

"By Jove, and I think so, too! Good for you, Rolston!" I shouted, seeing where he was going.

His boyish face was wreathed in smiles. "Thank you," he said. "Well, we are to lay a trap, and it is on the details of that trap that everything depends. I see, by to-day's *Times,* that Birmingham House in Berkeley Square, is to let. The Duke is ordered a long cruise in the Pacific. Let Mr. Morse immmediately take the house and issue invitations for a great ball to celebrate Miss Juanita's engagement. If that house and that ball are not to Midwinter as a candle is to a moth, then my theory is useless! Somehow or other he will be there, either before or actually on the occasion. By some means or other he will get into the house."

He stopped, and with a little apologetic look took out his cigarette case and began to smoke. He really was wonderful. This was the lad, airily ordering one of the richest men in the world to take the Duke of Birmingham's great mansion, whose capital but a few short weeks ago was one penny, bronze. I remember how he was forced to confess it to me, even as I congratulated him.

We talked on for another half-hour, or rather little Bill Rolston talked, the rest of us only putting in a word now and then. He seemed to have mapped out every detail of the new campaign, and we were content to listen and admire.

Of course I am not a person without original ideas, or unaccustomed to organization—my career, such as it is, has proved that. But on that night, at least, I could initiate nothing, and I was even glad when the conference came to an end. Morse was much the same—he confessed it to me as we left the room—and the truth is that we were both feeling the results of the terrible shocks we had undergone. Rolston was younger and fresher, and besides his peril had not been as great as mine or the millionaire's.

Pu-Yi vanished in his mysterious fashion, and Morse, Rolston and I went to dinner. There was no question of dressing on such a night as this, but, if you believe me, the meal was a merry one!

It was Juanita's whim to have dinner served in a wonderful conservatory built out on that side of the Palacete which looked upon the gardens separating it from the eastern villa where Rolston and I were housed. The place was yet another of the fantastic marvels conjured up by Morse and his millions. It was an exact reproduction of a similar conservatory at my host's house in Rio de Janeiro, and had been carried out at a frightful cost by the greatest landscape gardener and the most celebrated scenic artist in existence.

We sat at a little table, surrounded by tall palm trees rising from thick, tropical undergrowth, a gay striped awning was over our heads, protecting us from what seemed brilliant sunshine. On every side was the golden rain of mimosa, masses of deep crimson blossoms, and wax-like magnolia flowers. From a marble pool of clear water sprang

a little fountain—a laughing rod of diamonds. In the distance, seen over a marble balustrade, was the deep blue of the tropic sea dominated by the great sugar-loaf mountain, the Pão de Azucar.

It was an illusion, of course, but it was perfect. That sea, and the gleaming mountain, which, from where we sat, seemed so real, was but a cleverly painted cloth. The warm and scented air came to us through concealed pipes, and down in the lower portion of the City, patient, moon-faced Chinamen were at work to produce it. The sunlight, actually as brilliant as real sunlight, was the result of a costly installation of those marvelous and newly invented lamps which are used in the great cinema studios. Only the trees and the flowers were real.

Outside, it was a keen, cold night. We were perched on the top of gaunt, steel towers, more than two thousand feet in the air, and yet, I swear to you, all thought of our surroundings, and even of our peril, was banished for a brief and laughing hour. Like the tired traveler in some clearing of those lovely South American forests from which the wealth of Morse had sprung, we had forgotten the patient jaguar that follows in the tree-tops for a week of days to strike at last.

I dwell upon this scene because it was another of those little interludes, during my life in the City of the Clouds, which stand out in such brilliant relief from the encircling horrors.

Juanita was in the highest spirits. I had never seen her more lovely or more animated. Morse himself, always a

trifle grim, unbent to a sardonic humor. He told us story after story of his early life, with shrewd flashes of wit and wisdom, revealing the keen and mordaunt intellect which had made him what he was. A wonderful pink champagne from Austria, looted from the Imperial cellars during the war, and priceless even then, poured new life into our veins —it was impossible to believe in the tragedy of the last few hours, in the shadow of any tragedy to come.

We adjourned to the music-room after dinner, an apartment paneled in cedar-wood and with a wagon roof, and Juanita played and sang to us for a time. It was just ten o'clock when Rolston looked at his watch and gave me a significant glance. I rose and said good-night, both Morse and Juanita announcing their intention of going to bed.

As we came to the outside door, Bill turned to me.

"Hadn't you better go back to our house, Sir Thomas, and sleep? Remember what you have been through."

"Sleep? I couldn't sleep if I tried! I feel as fit and well as ever I did—why?"

"I've promised to meet Mr. Pu-Yi in the office of the chief of the staff. Reports will be coming in of the search which has been going on all the evening. I am anxious to see how far it has got, though of course if Midwinter had been found, or any trace of him, we should have been informed at once. And there is something else, also—"

He stopped, and I made no inquiries. "Well, I'm with you," I said; for I felt ready for anything that might come, in a state of absolute, pleasant acquiescence in the present and the future. I hadn't a tremor of fear or anxiety.

One of those noiseless, toy, electric automobiles which I had already seen when Juanita first showed me the City, was waiting. We got in, and buzzed through the gardens, and down the tunnel which led to Grand Square. As we went, I saw shadowy figures patrolling everywhere. The whole place was alive with guards—my girl could sleep well this night!

As we came out of the tunnel I motioned to Bill to go slowly, and he pulled the lever, or whatever it was, that controlled the speed. In almost complete silence we began to circle the huge inclosure, the tires making no noise whatever upon the floor of wood blocks.

The air was keen, cold, and wonderfully pure. There was not a cloud in the heavens, and one looked up at a far-flung vault of black velvet spangled with gold. Never had I seen the stars so clear and brilliant in England, for the haze of smoke and the miasma of overbreathed air which is the natural atmosphere of London lay two thousand feet below. The Grand Square blazed with light. The buildings, with their spires, domes and cupolas, stood out with extraordinary clearness against the circumambient black of space. No outline was soft or blurred, everything was vividly, fantastically real. A veritable scene from the old Arabian Nights indeed! And something of the same thought must have come to my companion, for he looked up and said: "I once saw an extraordinary illustration by Willy Pogany of one of De Quincey's opium dreams—here it is, only a thousand times more marvelous!"

The fountain in the middle of the Square—a long dis-

tance away it seemed as we slowly skirted the buildings—made a ghostly laughter as it sprang from its dragon-supported basin of bronze. The gilded cupola of the observatory shone with a wan radiance, higher than all else, and a black triangle in the gold told me that the patient old Chinese astronomer surveyed the heavens, lost in a waking dream of the Infinite, probably loftily unconscious of all that had been going on in the magic city at his feet. I envied that serene, Oriental philosopher, Juanita's special friend and pet, who lived up there in his observatory, and, so I was told, hardly ever descended for any purpose at all. He was as inviolate a hermit as Saint Anthony. It was especially curious that I should have cast my glance heavenwards and have thought of that ancient sage at this moment. You will learn why afterwards.

We stopped at one of the white kiosks, from the interior of which the hydraulic lifts went down to the lower part of the City. It was in an upper story of that that the chief of the staff had his office, and, mounting a flight of steps, we entered, to find Pu-Yi sitting at a roll-top desk, scrutinizing a handful of paper reports.

"It is nearly over, Sir Thomas," he said, rising and placing chairs for us. "Almost every inch of the City has been searched, and but little remains to be done. There is not a single trace of the man, Midwinter."

I own that to hear this was a great relief. We were all of us fired with Rolston's plan of a trap down below in London. His theory seemed to be correct. Midwinter had somehow escaped, and we should meet him in due

time—for I had never a doubt of that. Meanwhile, Juanita and her father were safe.

"It is only what I expected, though how on earth he managed to get away remains to be seen!"

"It will come to light in due course," Pu-Yi replied. "And now, Sir Thomas, are you prepared to accompany me and Mr. Rolston? There are certain things to be done, and I shall be glad to have you as a witness."

"Anything you like—but what is it?"

"You must remember that the bodies of three dead men await disposal," he replied. "What remains of Zorilla—he fell into the lake on the first stage, though of course he was dead, strangled in mid-air, long before the impact. Then there is Mulligan, who died in defense of the City; finally Sen, the boy from my own province in China, of whose terrible end you are aware."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"We must keep to our policy of secrecy and noninterference by the outside world. The bodies must be destroyed, and by fire."

I gave a little inward shudder, but I don't think he noticed it, and in a minute more we were dropping to the lower City in a rapid lift.

It was in a furnace-room that provided some of the hot air for the conservatories on the stage above that I witnessed the ghastly and unceremonious finish of the mortal parts of the Spaniard and the Irishman, and it was cruel and sordid to a degree—or so it seemed to me. The long bundle of sacking which contained that which had housed the evil

soul of Señor Don Zorilla y Toro—I resisted a bland invitation on the part of a stoker in a blue jumper and a pleased smile to examine the stiff horror—was slung through an iron door into a white and glowing core of flame. There was a clang as the long, steel rods of the firemen pushed it to, and I cannot say that I felt much regret, only a sort of shuddering sickness and relief that the door was closed so swiftly.

But it was different in the case of Mulligan. I blamed Morse in my heart. The man had been strangled when saying his prayers. He was of the millionaire's own religion, and there should have been a priest to assist at these fiery obsequies of a faithful servant. I learned afterwards, I am glad to say, that Morse had not been consulted, and knew nothing about the actual disposal of the bodies until afterwards. You see the shock came—Rolston felt it too—from the fact that these bland and silent Asiatics were utterly without any emotion as they performed their task. They were heathens, worshiping Heaven knows what in their tortuous and secret souls. As poor Mulligan—they had put the body in a coffin and it took eight struggling, sweating Orientals to hoist and slide it into the furnace—vanished from my eyes, I put my hands before my face and said such portions of the Protestant burial service as I remembered, and they were very few.

"They're nasty beasts, aren't they, Sir Thomas?" Rolston whispered, as we fled the furnace room. "Soulless, just like machines!"

We waited for Pu-Yi for a minute or two.

"I thank you, Sir Thomas, and Mr. Rolston," he said in his calm, silky voice. "It was as well that you saw the disposal of the dead, though it is only a remote contingency that there will ever be inquiry. And now, if you wish, I will send you up again. I, myself, must attend to the obsequies of my compatriot."

"Oh," I remarked, and I fear my tone was far from pleasant, "you propose to be rather more ceremonious in the case of the lad, Sen?"

For a single moment I saw that calm and gentle face disturbed. Something looked out of it that was not good to see, but it was gone in a flash. This was the first and last time that I had a shadow of disagreement with the man whose life I had saved and who saved mine in return. It was natural, I think—neither of us was to blame. "East is East and West is West," and there are some points at least at which they can never meet. Poor Pu-Yi! He had as fine an intellect as any man I ever met, and was a great gentleman. I wish I could look upon him once more as I write this, but, though I didn't know it, the sand in the glass was nearly out and our hours together dwindling fast.

We followed him through various twists and turns of the under City, among the huts and storehouses, thronged with silent people—it was like moving in the interior of a hive of bees—until, by means of an archway and a closed door, we emerged in a sort of courtyard surrounded on three sides by buildings. On the fourth was a rail, breast-high, and above and around was open night.

"We can't take his body to China," said our guide. "We must burn it here, and only the ashes will rest in the village of his ancestors. But it is well. Such cases are provided for in my religion."

We then saw that in the center of the yard there was a low funeral pile, apparently of wood. Two men in long, yellow gowns were pouring some liquid over it.

"If you will do me the honor to come this way," said Pu-Yi, and we entered a long, bare room. In the center of this place there was a large square box of painted wood, the lid of which was not yet in place. The body of the dead man was sitting in the box, the hands clasped round the knees. The nose, ears and mouth were filled with vermilion, which, to our Western eyes, gave a horrible, grotesque appearance to the brown, wrinkled mask of the face. Poor Sen's countenance was placid enough, but it was not like that of even a dead man, a fantastic image, rather.

A gong beat with a sudden hollow reverberation, and from another door a file of mourners entered.

At the far end of the room was a table upon which was a painted tablet. "It bears," whispered Pu-Yi, "the name under which Sen enters salvation."

Two men swinging censers stood by the table, and two others, a little nearer the corpse, held bronze bowls of water. First Pu-Yi, and then the other mourners, dipped their hands in the water to purify them, and then, producing paper packets of incense from their bosoms, they threw a pinch into the censers with the right hand and

bowed low to the table, retiring backwards. It was all done with the precision of a drill and in absolute silence, and for my part I found it no less ghastly and unreal than the brutal scene in the furnace-room below.

"Come out," I whispered to Rolston, and we reëntered the pure air, walking to the rail at one side of the square.

We leant over. Far, far below, so far that it was sensation rather than vision, was a faint, full glow, the night lights of London, but of the city itself nothing could be seen whatever. Even the burnished ribbon of the Thames had disappeared, and no sound rose from the capital of the world. There was a thin whispering round us as the night breezes blew through steel stay and cantilever, a faint humming noise like that of some gigantic Æolian harp. And once, as we bathed ourselves in the cool, the immensity and the dark, there was a rush of whirring wings, and the "honk-konk" of the wild duck from the great lake fifteen hundred feet below, as they passed in wedge-shaped flight on some mysterious night errand. We leant and gazed, filled with awe and solemnity, until a low, wailing chant and the thin, piercing notes of single-wire-strung violins made us turn to see the square box hoisted on the bier, a torch applied, and a roaring spitting column of yellow flame towering up above the buildings and throwing a ghastly light on a hundred round, mask-like faces, indistinguishable one from the other by European eyes.

As I read now, ten years afterwards, that scene among so many others comes back to me with extraordinary vivid-

ness. And it seems to me as I live my English life in honor, tranquillity, and happiness, that it was all a monstrous dream.

Surely—yes, I think I am safe in saying this—there will never again be such a place of horror and fantasy as the City in the Clouds.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I SLEPT that night like a log, untroubled by dreams, and woke late the next morning. It was then that, as the saying is, I got it in the neck. "Wow!" I half-shouted, half-groaned, as I turned to meet the Chinese valet with the morning cup of tea. My whole body seemed one bruise, my joints turned to pith, and, what was worse than all, my brain—a pretty active organ, take it all in all—seemed stuffed with wool.

It was the reaction, only to be expected, as the Richmond doctor said to me some three hours later. For the next two or three days I was to do nothing at all, after my "bad fall," which was the way my state had been explained to him. Whether he believed it or not, I cannot tell. It was certainly odd that Mr. Mendoza Morse, whom he also attended, should be in very much the same state of shock and semi-collapse. But he was a discreet, clean-shaven gentleman, with a comfortable manner, and in the seventh heaven at being admitted to the mysterious City in the Clouds, his eyes everywhere as he was being conducted through its wonders to our bedsides—so Rolston told me afterwards. At any rate, he was right. It was certainly necessary to go slow for a few days, and fortunately, now that the search was over and no trace of Midwinter discovered, we felt we could do this.

The preliminary arrangements for our final effort were left in Rolston's hands, who descended with the doctor, and I did not rise till mid-day.

I met Morse at lunch—*piano,* and distinctly under the weather from a physical point of view. We neither of us talked of important matters, but enjoyed a stroll round the City during a bright afternoon. At tea-time we met Juanita, and I had a long and happy talk with her. She knew, of course, that the search had proved satisfactory, and—as we had all agreed together—I led her to think that all danger was now practically over. Indeed, as far as Morse and she were concerned, I believed it myself. I knew that there was yet a grim tussle ahead for the rest of us, but that was all. I did not see her at dinner, but took the meal alone in my own house. Rolston was still absent, and as I did not want to talk to any one, failing Juanita, I was quite happy by myself.

About nine o'clock I was rung up on the telephone. Morse spoke. He said he was now thoroughly rested, and was ready for a chat. If I hadn't seen the treasures of the library yet, he and Pu-Yi would be pleased to show them to me. And so, slipping on a coat over my evening clothes, and taking a light cane in my hand, I started out for Grand Square. It was again, I may mention here, a fine and calm night.

My host and the Chinaman were waiting for me in the great, Gothic room, and we inspected the treasures in some of the glass-fronted shelves. I was surprised and delighted to find that my future father-in-law had a real love for, and

a considerable knowledge of, books. It was a side of him I had not seen before. I had not connected him with the arts in any way, which, when you come to think of it, was rather foolish. Certainly he had the finest expert advice and help to be found in the whole world in the building of the City in the Clouds. But I should have remembered that the initial conception was his own and that many of the details also came entirely from his brain. Certainly, in his way, Mendoza Morse was a creative artist.

My own collection of books at Stax, my place in Hertfordshire, is, of course, well known, and always mentioned when English libraries are under discussion. But Morse could boast treasures far beyond me. During the last year or two I had been so busy in working up the *Evening Special* that I had quite neglected to follow the book sales, but I learned now that some of the rarest treasures obtainable had been quietly bought up on Morse's behalf. He had all the folios, and most of the quartos, of Shakespeare, a fine edition of Spenser's "Faërie Queene" with an inscription to Florio, the great Elizabethan scholar; there was Boswell's own copy of Johnson's "Lives of the Poets," with a ponderous Latin inscription in the sturdy old doctor's own hand, and many other treasures as rare, though not perhaps of such popular and general interest.

Pu-Yi made us some marvelous tea in the Chinese fashion, with a sort of ritual which was impressive as he moved about the table and waved his long pale hands. It was of a faint, straw color, with neither sugar, milk, or lemon, and he assured me that it came from the stores of the Forbidden

City in Pekin. Certainly, it was nasty enough for anything, and I praised it as I had praised Morse's rose-colored champagne the night before—but with less sincerity.

I don't know if my friend had a touch of homesickness or not, but he began to tell us of his home by the waters of the Yang-Tse-Kiang. His precise and literary English rose and fell in that great room with a singular charm, and though I don't think Morse listened much, he smoked a cigar with great good-humor while Pu-Yi expounded his quaint, Eastern philosophy. We did not refer to the grim scenes of the night before, but something I said turned the conversation to the funeral customs of China.

"Indeed, Sir Thomas," said Pu-Yi, "the death of a man of my nation may be said to be the most important act of his whole life. For then only can his personal existence be properly considered to begin."

This seemed a somewhat startling proposition, and I said so, but he proceeded to explain. I shall not easily forget his little monologue, every word of which I remember for a very sad and poignant reason. Well, he knows all about it now, and I hope he is happy.

"It is in this way," he said. "By death a man joins the great company of ancestors who are, to us, people of almost more consequence than living folk, and of much more individual distinction. It is then at last," he continued, delicately sipping his tea, "that the individual receives that recognition which was denied him in the flesh. Our ancestors are given a dwelling of their own and devotedly reverenced. This, I know, will seem strange to Western ears, but be-

lieve me, honorable sir, the cult is anything but funereal. For the ancestral tombs are temples and pleasure pavilions at the same time, consecrated not simply to rites and ceremonies, but to family gatherings and general jollification."

This was quite a new view to me, and certainly interesting. I said so, and Pu-Yi smiled and bowed.

"And the fortunate defunct," he went on, "if he is still half as sentient as his dutiful descendants suppose, must feel that his earthly life, like other approved comedies, has ended well!"

His voice was sad, but there was a faint, malicious mockery in it also, and as I looked at him with an answering smile to his own, I wondered whether that keen and subtle brain really believed in the customs of his land. That he would be studious and rigid in their outward observance, I knew.

I never met, as I have said before, a more courteous gentleman than Pu-Yi.

"Ever been in South Germany?" said Morse suddenly —he had evidently been pursuing a train of his own thought while the Chinaman held forth.

"Yes, Mr. Morse, why?"

"Then in some of those quaint, old-fashioned towns you have seen the storks nesting on the roofs of the houses?"

I remembered that I had.

"Well, I've got a pair of storks—they arrived this morning from Germany—duck and drake, or should you say cock and hen?—at any rate, I've a sort of idea of trying to domesticate them, and to that end have had a nest con-

structed on the roof of this building, where they will be sheltered by the parapet and be high up above the roof of the City. What do you say to going to have a look at them and see if they're all right?"

Extraordinary man! He had always some odd or curious idea in his mind to improve his artificial fairyland. Nothing loth, we left Pu-Yi and ascended a winding staircase to the roof of the great building. Save for the lantern in the center, it was flat and made a not unpleasant promenade. The storks were at present in a cage, and could only be distinguished as bundles of dirty feathers in a miscellaneous litter. I thought my friend's chance of domesticating them was very small, but he seemed to be immensely interested in the problem.

When we had talked it over, he gave me a cigar and we began to promenade the whole length of the roof. As I have said, the night was clear and calm. Again the great stars globed themselves in heaven with an incomparable glory unknown and unsuspected by those down below. The silence was profound, the air like iced wine.

From where we were, we had a bird's-eye view of the whole City. Grand Square lay immediately at our feet, brilliantly illuminated as usual. Not a living soul was to be seen; only the dragon-fountain glittered with mysterious life. To the right, beyond the encircling buildings of the Square, stood the Palacete Mendoza surrounded by its gardens, a square, white, sleeping pile. I sent a mental greeting to Juanita. So high was the roof on which we stood that only one of the towers or cupolas rose much above us. It

was the dome of the observatory, exactly opposite on the other side of Grand Square.

"There is some one who isn't much troubled by sub-lunary affairs," I said, pointing over the *machicolade.*

Morse nodded, and expelled a blue cloud of smoke. "I guess old Chang is the most contented fellow on earth," he said. "He is Professor, you know, Professor Chang, and an honorary M.A. of Oxford University. I had him from the Imperial Chinese Observatory at Pekin, and I am told he is on the track of a new comet, or something, which is to be called after me when he has discovered it—thus conferring immortality upon yours truly!

"It is an odd temper of mind," he went on more seriously, "that can spend a whole life in patient seclusion, peering into the unknown, and what, after all, is the unknowable. Still, he is happy, and that is the end of human endeavor."

He sighed, and with renewed interest I stared out at the round dome. The slit over the telescope was open, which showed that the astronomer was at work. In the gilded half-circle of the cupola, it was exactly like a cut in an orange.

I was about to make a remark, when an extraordinary thing happened.

Without any hint or warning, there was a loud, roaring sound, like that of some engine blowing off steam. With a "whoosh," a great column of fire, like golden rain, rose up out of the dark aperture in the dome, towering hundreds of feet in the sky, like the veritable comet for which old Chang was searching, and burst high in the empyrean

with a dull explosion, followed by a swarm of brilliant, blue-white stars.

Some one inside the observatory had fired a gigantic rocket.

Morse gave a shout of surprise. He had a fresh cigar in his hand, and, unknowingly, he dropped it and mechanically bit the end of his thumb instead.

"What was that?" I cried, echoing his shout.

He didn't answer, but grew very white as he stepped up to the parapet, placed his hand upon the stone, and leant forward.

I did the same, and for nearly a minute we stared at the white, circular tower in silence.

Nothing happened. There was the black slit in the gold, enigmatic and undisturbed.

"Some experiment," I stammered at length. "Professor Chang is at work upon some problem."

Morse shook his head. "Not he! I'll swear that old Chang would never be letting off fireworks without consulting or warning Pu-Yi. Kirby, there is some black business stirring! We must look into this. I don't like it at all—hark!"

He suddenly stopped speaking, and put his hand to his ear. His whole face was strained in an ecstasy of listening, which cut deep gashes into that stern, gnarled old countenance.

I listened also, and with dread in my heart. Instinctively and without any process of reasoning, I knew that in some way or other the horror was upon us again. My lips went

dry and I moistened them with the tip of my tongue; and, without conscious thought, my hand stole round to my pistol pocket and touched the cold and roughened stock of an automatic Webley.

Then I heard what Morse must have heard at first.

The air all around us was vibrating, and swiftly the vibration became a throb, a rhythmic beat, and then a low, menacing roar which grew louder and louder every second.

We had turned to each other, understanding at last, and the same word was upon our lips when the thing came—it happened as rapidly as that.

Skimming over the top of the distant Palacete like some huge night-hawk, and with a noise like a machine gun, came a venomous-looking, fast-flying monoplane. It swept down into Grand Square like a living thing, just as the noise ceased suddenly and echoed into silence. It alighted at one end and on the side of the fountain nearest the observatory, ran over the smooth wood-blocks for a few yards, and stopped. It was as though the hawk had pounced down upon its prey, and every detail was distinct and clear in the brilliant light of the lamps in the Square below.

Both of us seemed frozen where we stood. I know, for my part, all power of motion left me. A choking noise came from Morse's throat, and then we heard a cry and from immediately below us came the figure of Pu-Yi, hurrying down the library steps and running towards the aeroplane, which was still a considerable distance from him.

The next thing happened very quickly. A door at the foot of the observatory tower opened, and out came what

we both thought was the figure of the astronomer. He was a tall, bent, old man, habitually clothed in a padded, saffron-colored robe with a hood, something like that of a monk.

"Chang!" I said in a hoarse whisper, when Pu-Yi stopped short in his tracks, lifted his arm, and there was the crack of a pistol.

The figure beyond, which was hurrying towards the monoplane, swerved aside. The robe of padded silk fell from it and disclosed a tall man in dark, European clothes. He dodged and writhed like an eel as Pu-Yi emptied his automatic at him, apparently without the least result. Then I saw that he was at the side of the aeroplane, scrambling up into the fuselage assisted by the pilot in leather hood and goggles.

He was up the side of the boat-like structure in a second, and then, with one leg thrown over the car he turned and took deliberate aim at Pu-Yi. There was one crack, he waited for an instant to be sure, and saw that it was enough. Then there was a chunk of machinery, two or three loud explosions, a roar, and the wings of the venomous night-hawk moved rapidly over the parquet, chased by a black shadow. It gathered speed, lifted, tilted upwards, and, clearing the buildings at the far end of the Square, hummed away into the night.

. . . . . .

It was thus that Mark Antony Midwinter escaped from the City in the Clouds. He had been there all the time. He had murdered poor old Chang many hours before, and impersonated him with complete success. The food of the

recluse was brought to him by servants and placed in an outer room so that he should never be disturbed during his calculations. He had received it with his usual muttered acknowledgments through a little *guichet* in the wooden partition which separated the anteroom from the telescope chamber itself. No one had ever thought of doubting that the astronomer himself was there as usual. The whole thing was most carefully planned beforehand with diabolic ingenuity and resource.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was just three weeks after the murder of Pu-Yi, and once more I sat in my chambers in Piccadilly. The day had been cloudy, and now, late in the afternoon, a heavy fog had descended upon the town through which fell a cold and intermittent rain.

Up there, in the City in the Clouds, perhaps the sun was pouring down upon its spires and cupolas, but London, Piccadilly, was lowering and sad.

Lord Arthur Winstanley and Captain Pat Moore had just left me, both of them glum and silent. It went to my heart not to take them into my full confidence, but to do so was impossible. I had told them much of the recent events in the City—I could not tell them everything, for they would not have understood. Certainly I could have relied upon their absolute discretion, but, in view of what was going to happen that very night, I was compelled to keep my own counsel. They had not lived through what I had recently. Their minds were not tuned, as mine was, to the sublime disregard and aloofness from English law which obtained in Morse's gigantic refuge. Certainly neither of them would have agreed to what I proposed to do that night.

Preston came quietly into the library. He pulled the

curtains and made up the fire. The face of Preston was grim and disapproving. He looked much as he looked when —what ages ago it seemed!—I departed his comfortable care to become the landlord of the "Golden Swan."

"I'm not at home to any one, Preston," I said, "except to Mr. Sliddim, who ought to be here in a few minutes. Of course, that doesn't apply to Mr. Rolston."

"Very good, Sir Thomas, thank you, Sir Thomas," said Preston, scowling at the mention of the name. Poor fellow, he didn't in the least understand why I should be receiving the furtive and melancholy Sliddim so often, and should sit with him in conference for long hours! Afterwards, when it was all over, I interrogated my faithful servant, and the state of his mind during that period proved to have been startling.

This seems the place in which to explain exactly what had happened up to date.

When Midwinter had escaped, we found the corpse of poor old Professor Chang, and the whole plan was revealed to us. Pu-Yi had been shot through the heart. His death must have been instantaneous. For several days Morse was in a terrible state of depression and remorse. He said that there was a curse upon him, and it was with the greatest difficulty that Rolston and I could bring him into a more reasonable frame of mind. The long strain had worn down even that iron resolution, but, for Juanita's sake, I knew that I must stand by him to the end.

Accordingly, there was nothing else for it, Rolston and I took entire charge of everything. I had never felt in-

clined to go back from the very beginning. Now my resolution was firm to see it through to the end.

Rolston pursued his own plans, and London very shortly knew that Gideon Mendoza Morse and his lovely daughter were about to reappear in the world. It gave my little, red-haired friend intense pleasure to organize this mild press campaign from the office of the *Evening Special*. I placed him in complete control, to the intense joy of Miss Dewsbury and the disgust of the older members of the staff. Be that as it may, the thing was done, and every one knew that Birmingham House had been taken by the millionaire.

It was then, having organized things as perfectly as I could at the City, placing Kwang-Su, the gigantic gatekeeper of the ground inclosure, in charge of the staff, that I myself descended into the world as unobtrusively as possible. For a day or two I remained in seclusion at the "Golden Swan," and during those two days saw no one but the Honest Fool, Mrs. Abbs, my housekeeper, and—Sliddim, the private inquiry agent.

Personally, while I quite appreciated the fellow's skill in his own dirty work, and while indeed I owed him a considerable debt in the matter of Bill Rolston's first disappearance, I disliked him too much ever to have thought of him as a help in the very serious affair on which I was engaged. It was Rolston, as usual, who changed my mind. He saw farther than I did. He realized the essential secrecy and fidelity of the odd creature whom chance had unearthed from among the creeping things of London, and in the end he became an integral part of the plot.

He was told, of course, no more than was necessary. He was not by any means in our full confidence. But he was given a part to play, and promised a reward, if he played it well, that would make him independent for life. Let me say at once that he fulfilled his duty with admirable skill, and, when he received his check from Mr. Morse, vanished forever from our ken. I have no doubt that he is spying somewhere or other on the globe at this moment, but I have no ambition to meet him again.

Mr. Sliddim, considerably furbished up in personal appearance, was made caretaker at Birmingham House in Berkeley Square. He had not been in that responsible position for more than ten days when our fish began to nibble at the bait.

In a certain little public house by some mews at the back of Berkeley Square, a little public house which Mr. Sliddim was instructed—and needed no encouragement—to frequent, he was one day accosted by a tall, middle-aged man with a full, handsome face and a head of curling, gray hair. This man was dressed in a seedy, shabby-genteel style, and soon became intimate with our lure.

Certainly, to give him his due, Sliddim must have been a supreme actor in his way. He did the honest, but intensely stupid caretaker to the life. Mark Antony Midwinter was completely taken in and pumped our human conduit for all he was worth, until he was put in possession of an entirely fictitious set of circumstances, arranged with the greatest care to suit my plans.

I shall not easily forget the evening when Sliddim slunk

into my dining-room and described the scene which told us we had made absolutely no mistake and that our fish was definitely hooked. It seems that the good Sliddim had gradually succumbed to the repeated proffer of strong waters on the part of "Mr. Smith," his new friend. He had bragged of his position, only lamenting that some days hence it was to come to an end, when, in the evening, Mr. Mendoza Morse, his daughter, and a staff of servants were to enter the house simultaneously. Sliddim, the most consistent whisky-nipper I have ever seen—and I had some curious side-lights on that question when I was landlord of the "Golden Swan"—was physically almost incapable of drunkenness, but he simulated it so well in the little pub at the back of the Square that Mark Antony Midwinter made no ado about taking the latchkey of Birmingham House area door from his pocket and making a waxen impression of it.

Rolston and I knew that we were "getting very hot," as the children say when they are playing Hunt-the-Slipper, and another visit from Sliddim confirmed it. The plan of our enemy was perfectly clear to our minds. He would enter the house by means of the key an hour or two before Morse and the servants were due, conceal himself within it, and do what he had to do in the silent hours of the night.

It was quite certain that he believed Morse now felt himself secure, and no doubt Midwinter had arranged a plan for his escape from Berkeley Square, when his vengeance

was complete, as ingenious and thoroughgoing as that prepared for his literal flight from the City in the Clouds.

And now, on this very evening, I was to throw the dice in a desperate game with this human tiger.

"It is for to-night certain, sir," said Sliddim when he arrived. "I've let him know that I am leaving the house for a couple of hours this evening, between eight and ten, to see my old mother in Camden Town. At eleven he supposes that the servants are arriving, and at midnight Mr. and Miss Morse. A professional friend of mine is watching our gent very carefully. He is at present staying at a small private hotel in Soho, and I should think you had better come to the house about seven, on foot, and directly you ring I'll let you in. I've promised to meet our friend at the little public house in the mews at eight, for just one drink—he wants to be certain that I am really out of the way—and I should say that he would be inside Birmingham House within a quarter of an hour afterwards."

Rolston came in before the fellow went, and a few more details were discussed, which brought the time up to about six o'clock.

And then I had a most unpleasant and difficult few minutes. My faithful little lieutenant defied me for the first time since I had known him.

"I can't tell what time I shall be back," I said, "but I shall want you to be at the end of the telephone wire—there are plenty of telephones in Birmingham House."

"But I am going too, Sir Thomas," he said quickly.

I shook my head. "No," I said, "I must go through this alone."

"But it's impossible! You must have some one to help you, Sir Thomas! It is madness to meet that devil alone in an empty house. It's absolutely unnecessary, too. I *must* go with you. I owe him one for the blow he gave me when he escaped from the Safety-room at the City, and, besides—"

"Bill Rolston," I said, "the essence of fidelity is to obey orders. I owe more to you than I can possibly say! Without you, I dread to think what might have happened to Miss Morse and her father. But on this occasion I am adamant. You will be far more use to me waiting here, ready to carry out any instructions that may come over the wire."

"Please, Sir Thomas, if I ever *have* done anything, as you say, let me come with you to-night."

His voice broke in a sob of entreaty, but I steeled myself and refused him.

I must say he took it very well when he saw that there was no further chance of moving me.

"Very well then, Sir Thomas," he said, "if it must be so, it must be. I will be back here at seven, and wait all night if necessary."

With that, his face clouded with gloom, he went away and I was left alone.

Doubtless you will have gathered my motive? It would have been criminal to let Rolston, or any one else, have a share in this last adventure. To put it in plain English,

I determined, at whatever risk to myself, to kill Mark Antony Midwinter.

There was nothing else for it. The law could not be invoked. While he lived, my girl's life would be in terrible danger. The man had to be destroyed, as one would destroy a mad dog, and it was my duty, and mine alone, to destroy him. If I came off worst in the encounter, well, Morse still had skilled defenders. The risk, I knew, was considerable, but it seemed that I held the winning cards, for within two hours Midwinter would step into a trap.

When I had killed him I had my own plans as to the disposal of the body. It was arranged that a considerable number of Chinese servants from the City should arrive at eleven. If I knew those bland, yellow ruffians, it would not be a difficult thing to dispose of Midwinter's remains, either on the spot or by conveyal to Richmond. Another alternative was that I should shoot him in self-defense, as an ordinary burglar. Certainly the law would come in here, but it would be justifiable homicide and be merely a three days' sensation. I had to catch my hare first—the method of cooking it could be left till afterwards.

In a drawer in my writing-table were letters to various people, including my solicitor and my two friends, Pat Moore and Arthur Winstanley. There was a long one, also, to Juanita. Everything was arranged and in order. I am not aware that I felt any fear or any particular emotion, save one of deep, abiding purpose. Nothing would now have turned me from what I proposed to do. I had spent long thought over it and I was perfectly convinced that it

was an act of justice, irregular, dangerous to myself, but morally defendable by every canon of equity and right. The man was a murderer over and over again. To-night he would receive the honor of a private execution. That was all.

When I left my chambers, with an automatic pistol, a case of sandwiches, and a flask of whisky-and-water, the rain was descending in a torrent. The street was empty and dismal, and Berkeley Square itself a desert. I don't think I saw a single person, except one police-constable in oilskins sheltering under an archway, till I arrived at Birmingham House. The well-known façade of the mansion was blank and cheerless. All the blinds were down; there was not a sign of occupation. I rang, the door opened immediately, and I slipped in.

"I must be off, Sir Thomas," said Sliddim. "If you go through the door on the far side of the inner hall beyond the grand staircase, you will find yourself in a short passage with a baize door at the farther end. Push this open, and you will be in a small lobby. The door immediately to your left is that of the butler's pantry. It commands the service stairs and lift to the kitchen and servants' rooms. Standing in the doorway you will see the head of any one coming up the stairs, and—" he gave a sickly grin and something approaching a reptilian wink. Sliddim was an unpleasant person, and I never liked him less than at that moment.

With another whisper he opened the door a few inches and writhed out.

I was left alone in Birmingham House.

It was the queerest possible sensation, and as I crossed the great inner hall, with its tapestries and gleaming statuary, lit now by two single electric bulbs, I don't deny that my heart was beating a good deal faster than was pleasant. There is always something ghostly about an empty house, more especially when it is fully furnished and ready for occupation. The absence of all life is uncanny, and one seems to feel that it is hidden, not absent, and that at any moment a door may open and some enigmatic stranger be standing there with an unpleasant welcome in his eyes.

Well, I slunk through all the glories of the grand hall, passed down the passage, and came out into the servants' quarters. The little lobby, the floor of which was covered with cork matting, was well lit, and so were the stairs. I peered over the rail, but could not see to the bottom; but, standing in the door of the room called the butler's pantry, I saw that I could put a bullet through the head of any one appearing, before he could have the slightest inkling of my presence, before he could slew round, even, to face me.

The butler's pantry itself was a fair-sized, comfortable room, with a carpet on the floor and a couple of worn, padded armchairs by the fireplace. The walls were hung with photographs; on one side was a business-like roll-top desk, and in a corner a large safe which obviously contained the plate in daily use in the great household. I knew that the bulk of the valuables were stored in a strong room in Chancery Lane.

Upon the table Mr. Sliddim had thoughtfully placed a

heavy cut-glass decanter half full of whisky, a siphon, and —*glasses!* The whisky was all right, but did he expect me to hobnob with Antony Midwinter, to speed the parting guest, as it were, with a stirrup-cup? It was difficult to suspect him of such grim humor.

I looked at my watch. There was still a good half-hour before Midwinter and Sliddim were due to meet in the little public house behind the Square. I saw that my pistol was handy, and sat down in one of the armchairs by the fireside. A pipe of the incomparable "John Cotton" would not be amiss, I thought, wondering if I should ever taste its fragrance again, and for some minutes I sat and smoked, placidly enough. Then, I suppose a quarter of an hour or so must have elapsed, I began to fidget in my chair.

The house was so terribly still! Still, but not quite silent! Time, that was ticking away so rapidly, had a score of small voices. There was the faint noise of taxicabs out in the Square, the drip of the rain, an occasional stealthy creak from the furniture, the scurry of a mouse in the wainscot; the more remote chambers of my brain began to fill with riot, and once my nerves jerked like a hooked fish.

And even now I do not think it was fear. Terror, perhaps—there is a subtle distinction—but not craven fear. I think, perhaps, it was more the sense of something coldly evil that might even now be approaching through the fog and rain, a lost soul inspired with cunning, hatred, and ferocity, whom I must meet in deadly contact within a short, but unknown, space of time. . . .

"This won't do at all!" I thought, and then my eye fell on Mr. Sliddim's hospitable preparations. I got up, went round to the other side of the table, put my pistol down upon it, and mixed a stiff peg.

My back was now to the open door, and I was just lifting the glass to my lips, eagerly enough, I am afraid, when, very softly, something descended upon each of my shoulders.

I had not heard a sound of any sort, save the gurgle of the aerated water in the glass, but now a shriek like that of a frightened woman rang out into the room, and it came from me.

I was gripped horribly by the back of the throat, whirled round with incredible speed and force, and flung heavily against the opposite wall, falling sideways into an armchair, gasping for breath and my eyes staring out of my head.

Then I saw him. Mark Antony Midwinter was standing on the other side of the table, smiling at me. He wore a fashionable morning coat and a silk hat. Under his left arm was a gold-headed walking-cane, and he carried his gloves in his left hand. In the right was the gleaming blue-black of an automatic pistol, pointed at my heart.

At that, I pulled myself together. In an instant I knew that I had failed. The brute must already have been in the house when Sliddim admitted me—he had outwitted all of us!

"Ah!" he said, "Sir Thomas Kirby! You have crossed my path very many times of late, Sir Thomas, and I have long wished to make your acquaintance."

His voice was suave and cultured. The rather full, clean-shaved face had elements of fineness—many women would have called him a handsome man. But in his dull and opaque eyes there was such a glare of cold malignity, such unutterable cruelty and hate, that the whole room grew like an ice-house in a moment; for it is not often that any man sees a veritable fiend of hell looking out of the eyes of another.

"You have come a little earlier than I expected," I managed to say, but my voice rang cracked and thin.

"It is a precaution that I frequently take, Sir Thomas, and one very much justified in the present instance. To tell the truth, I had little or no suspicion that I was walking into a trap—that much to you! But a life of shocks"—here he laughed pleasantly, but the little steel disk pointed at my heart never wavered a hair's breadth—"has taught me always to have something in reserve. I see that I shall not have the pleasure of settling accounts with Mr. Gideon Morse and his daughter to-night. Well, that can wait. Meanwhile, I propose within a few seconds to remove another obstacle from my path—do you think the mandarin, Pu-Yi, will be waiting for you at the golden gates, Sir Thomas Kirby?"

So this was the end! I braced myself to meet it.

"How long?" I said.

"I will count a hundred slowly," he answered.

He began, and I stared dumbly at the pistol. I could not think—I could not commend my soul to my Maker even. The function of thought was entirely arrested.

"Thirty . . . thirty-one . . . thirty-two!"

And then I suddenly burst out laughing.

My laughter, I know, was perfectly natural, full of genuine merriment. Something had happened which seemed to me irresistibly comic. He stopped and stared at me, his face changing ever so little.

"May I ask," he said, "what tickled your sense of humor?"

What had tickled my sense of humor was this. Stealing round from behind him, right under his very nose, so to speak, but quite unseen, was an arm which with infinite care and slowness was removing the heavy cut-glass decanter from the table. It vanished. It reappeared in the air behind him in a flashing diamond and amber circle.

"Have some whisky, Mr. Midwinter," I said, as it descended with a crash upon the side of his head.

Without a sound he sank into a huddled heap out of my sight, hidden by the table.

"You little devil!" I said, staggering to my feet, for Bill Rolston stood there, white-faced and grinning. "I had to come, Sir Thomas," he said, "it wasn't any use."

"Have you killed him, Bill?"

We bent down and made an examination. Midwinter's face was dark and suffused with blood, but his pulses were all right.

"What a pity!" said Rolston. "Help me to get him on to that chair, Sir Thomas, and we'll tie him up. If I had killed him, it would have been so much simpler!"

We dragged the unconscious man to the very armchair

where I had sat under the menace of his pistol, and, tearing the tablecloth into strips, tied him securely.

"Fortunately," said Bill, "I didn't break the decanter. The stopper didn't even come out! You look pretty sick, Sir Thomas"—and indeed a horrible feeling of nausea had come over me, and my hands were shaking—"let's each have a drink and then I'll tell you what I think."

We sat down on each side of the table, and I listened to him as if the whole thing were some curious dream. For the second time I had been snatched from the very brink of death, and though I suppose I ought to have been getting used to it my only sensation was one of limpness and collapse.

"Can you do it?" my little friend said, pointing to the pistol between us.

I took it up, weighed it in my hand, half-pointed it at the stiff, red-faced figure in the chair, and laid it down again.

"No, I'm damned if I can!" I answered. And then—I must have been more than half-dazed—I actually said: "You have a go, Bill."

He looked at me in horror.

"Murder him in cold blood! I should never know a moment's peace, Sir Thomas!"

"Well, you nearly did it in hot, and you've just been tempting me—"

"Let us bring him to, if we can," he said, tactfully changing the conversation and advancing upon our friend with the siphon of soda-water.

There was a grotesque horror about the whole of our adventure that night. I laughed weakly as the soda hissed and the stream of aerated water splashed over Midwinter's face.

Before the final gurgle he awoke. His eyes opened without speculation. Then his jaw dropped. For a moment his face was as vacant as a doll's, and then it flared up into a snarl of realization and hatred, only, in another instant, to settle down into a dead calm.

"My turn now," I said.

He knew the game was up. I will do him the justice to say he did not flinch.

"Very well, count a hundred," was his answer, and his eye fell to the two pistols on the table—his own and mine.

I shook my head. "I can't do it—I wish I could!"

"You'll find it quite easy—I speak from experience," he replied, with a desperate, evil grin.

"No. I have talked the situation over with my friend. You are going to die, that is very certain, but not by my hand now, and not, Mr. Midwinter, by the hand of the English law."

He was very quick. Even then he had an inkling of my meaning, for a perceptible shadow fell over his face and his eyes narrowed to slits.

"You mean?"

"We are going to telephone to the City in the Clouds. People will come from there and take you away—that will be easily managed. You will have some form of trial, and then—execution."

I never saw a change from red to white so sudden. That big face suddenly became a hideous, sickly white, toneless and opaque like the belly of a sole.

"You won't deliver me to the Chinese?" he gasped. "You can't know them as I do. They'd take a week killing me! They have horrible secrets—"

His voice died away in a whimper, and if ever I saw a man in deadly terror, it was that man then.

But I hardened my heart. I remembered how Morse and Juanita had suffered for two years at this man's hands. I remembered four murders, to my own knowledge, and I shrugged my shoulders.

"I can't help that. You have made your bed, and you must lie upon it."

"But such a bed!" he murmured, and his head fell forward on his chest.

His arms were bound at the elbow, but he could move the lower portion, and he now brought his right hand to his face.

"I'll telephone," said Bill, and went to the wall by the door where hung the instrument.

I sat gloomily watching the man in the chair.

What was he doing? His jaw was moving up and down. He seemed biting at his wrist.

Suddenly there was a slight, tearing, ripping noise, followed by a jerk backwards of his head and a deep intake of the breath.

"What is he doing?" Rolston said, turning round with the receiver of the telephone at his ear.

Midwinter held out his arm. I saw that the braid round the cuff of his morning coat was hanging in a little strip.

"I told you I always had something in reserve," he said, showing all his teeth as he grinned at me. "Always something up my sleeve—literally, in this case. I have just swallowed a little capsule of prussic acid which—"

If you want to learn of how a man dies who has swallowed hydrocyanic acid—the correct term, I believe—consult a medical dictionary. It is not a pleasant thing to see in actual operation, but, thank heavens, it is speedy!

The sweat was pouring down my face when it was over, but Bill Rolston had not turned a hair.

"Put something over his face, Sir Thomas," he said, "and I'll get through to Mr. Morse."

ENVOI

I TAKE up my pen this evening, exactly ten years after I wrote the last paragraph of the above narrative, to read of James Antony Midwinter, dead like a poisoned rat in his chair, with a sort of amazement in my mind.

The whole story has been locked in a safe for ten long years, and that blessed and happy time has made the wild adventures, the terrible moments in the City in the Clouds, indeed seem things far off and long ago.

This afternoon I paid what will probably be my last visit to the strange kingdom up there.

I stood with my little son, Viscount Kirby, and my small daughter, Lady Juanita, and my wife, the Countess of Stax, at a very solemn ceremony.

In the presence of a Government official, a representative of His Majesty—Colonel Patrick Moore, of the Irish Guards, A.D.C.—the Cardinal Archbishop, and a few private friends, I watched the elmwood shell, containing Gideon Mendoza Morse, placed in its marble tomb.

It was his wish, to be buried there in his fantastic City, and no one said him nay. Well, the body lies in its place, two hundred weeping Chinamen are returning to the Flowery Land, wealthy beyond their utmost hopes, and in a few months the City in the Clouds will dissolve and disappear.

The rich treasures are coming to Stax, my castle in Nor-

folk—such as are not bequeathed, by Morse's munificence, to the museums of England and the galleries at Brazil.

Soon the immense plateau will be England's aerial terminus for the mail ships from all parts of the world.

While Gideon Morse lived it was impossible to publish the truth. It is to appear now, at last, and I simply want to tie a few loose ends, and to bring down the curtain, leaving nothing unexplained.

First of all let me say that the general public knew nothing at all of the horrors in which I was so intimately concerned.

Juanita and I were married very quietly in Westminster Cathedral soon after Midwinter went to his account. The enormous fortune that she brought me, supplementing my own very considerable means, operated in the natural way. Other journals were added to the *Evening Special,* and we started a great campaign for the sweetening of ordinary life, and not unsuccessfully, as every one knows.

They made me a baron, and four years afterwards, Earl of Stax. As for my father-in-law, he refused to budge from the City in the Clouds.

I don't mean that he didn't make appearances in society, but he loved to get back to his fantastic haven, from whence, like a magician, he showered benefits upon London.

Arthur Winstanley, as everybody knows, is Under-Secretary for India and the most rising politician of our day.

It is said that William Rolston, editor of the *Evening*

Special, is our most brilliant journalist, though the older school condemn him for an excess of imagination. I saw the other day, in the old-fashioned *Thunderer,* a slashing attack upon a series of articles which had recently appeared upon China, and which the critic of the *Thunderer* conclusively proved to be written from an abysmal depth of ignorance.

I don't often go to the office now, though I am still proprietor of the paper, but when I do, and sit in the editorial room, I miss Julia Dewsbury, best of all private secretaries since the beginning of the world.

Bill, however, assures me that she is all right, entirely taken up with the children, and not in the least inclined to bully him in spite of her eight years advantage in age.

"To that woman," says Bill reverentially, "I owe everything."

Let me wind up properly.

Crouching behind a high wall on Richmond Hill is a modest hostelry still known as the "Golden Swan." It is still my property, and pays me a satisfactory dividend. It is run by a co-partnership, which I should say is unique.

The Honest Fool and my ex-valet, Mr. Preston, perform this feat together, but, now that Morse is dead and the Chinese have all departed, I fear they will lose a good deal of custom. This I gathered from Mr. Mogridge, that pillar of the saloon bar, who happened to meet me by chance in Fleet Street not long ago.

"'Allo! Why, it's Mr. Thomas, late landlord of the 'Golden Swan'!" said Mr. Mogridge. "'Aven't seen you for years. What are you doing now?"

"Oh, I'm doing very well, thank you, Mr. Mogridge. And how is the old 'Swan'?"

"Same as ever and no dropping off in the quality of the drinks. Still, I fear it's going down. I'm afraid it will never be quite the same as it was in the days of Ting-A-ling-A-ling," and here Mr. Mogridge placed his hands upon his hips and roared with laughter at that ancient joke.

THE END

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